

**THE RISE OF THE AMERICAN CULTURE OF SENSATIONALISM: 1620-1860**

**by**

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

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The manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

### THE RISE OF THE AMERICAN CULTURE OF SENSATIONALISM: 1620-1860

by

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Much has been written about the unprecedented proliferation of sensationalist literature in the nineteenth century but very little about its origins. Such an oversight leaves our sense of early American literary history incomplete and even distorted by some persistent misconceptions about the concept of sensationalism and its place in American culture. In this dissertation I devise methodical ways of approaching this subject and explain its significance in the formation of American literary conventions. My project expands the scope of recent scholarship on sensationalist literature by examining the two areas which have so far been neglected in American studies: the origins of the American tradition of sensationalism and its place in the transatlantic context. As I demonstrate, the spectacular rise of sensationalist literature in the nineteenth century was not a spontaneous development. It grew out of a long domestic tradition of sensationalist rhetoric that emerged in the colonial period—much earlier than what is commonly perceived as the first significant outbreak of literary sensationalism in the aftermath of the American Revolution. Furthermore, patterns of provocative rhetoric, which emerged early in the colonial period, formed an enduring rhetorical tradition whose proponents relied on a set of recognizable conventions that made a notable impact on American literary history.

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#### NOTE ON THE TEXT

With a few exceptions, which are noted in the text, all quotations are reproduced in their original spelling and appearance. I neither corrected nor indicated the obvious misspellings in the quoted materials.



Richard Caton Woodville, "War News from Mexico," 1848.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

“How mortified one ought to feel on being told a tale of scandal; because it proves that the relater believes one able of enjoying it, and certainly it is an enjoyment of a very diabolical nature.”

*The Lincoln Intelligencer*

October 10, 1822

## INTRODUCTION

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE AND ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN TRADITION OF SENSATIONALISM**

“For wee must consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the ways of god and all professours for Gods sake; wee shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Curses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whither wee are going.”

John Winthrop  
*A Model of Christian Charity*, 1630

In 1841, at the height of what can be described as the golden age of American sensationalism, a young Boston historian Peleg W. Chandler published a book with an ordinary title but an amazingly ambitious intent. At the time when many popular writers indulged their readers' taste for copious accounts of contemporary crimes and scandalous revelations, Chandler's *American Criminal Trials* went so far as to sum up the entire American history, from the first Puritan settlements to the outbreak of the American Revolution, as a series of scandals and criminal trials. He started with the Antinomian controversy and the trial of Anne Hutchinson in 1638. Then he turned his attention to the persecution of Quakers in the 1660s and the infamous witch trials at Salem in 1692. The subsequent chapters were devoted to other noteworthy cases, including Thomas Maule's trial for blasphemy in 1696, the notorious New York Negro Plot of 1741, and the Boston Massacre of 1770.

Chandler's historical approach was clearly unorthodox. The readers who were accustomed to reverent tributes to their country's history must have been irritated by the

fact that Chandler did not write at all about great discoveries, glorious wars, revolutions, or the rise of democracy. He actually ignored all the events that could create a sense of progress in the United States. American history, he suggested, could be better understood as a sequence of crimes and trials. What was even more provocative was that some cases which Chandler chose for his book, particularly the prosecution of Anne Hutchinson and the Salem witch trials, gave the impression that the flaws of the justice system were far more serious than the culprits' guilt. Combine these points and you will get the impression that American history is just a series of flawed trials in which one cannot quite tell the difference between criminals and victims.

It is important to point out that Chandler was not a cheap provocateur. In spite of its provocative character, *American Criminal Trials* has to be appreciated as a serious historical work. Its author explained why he was drawn to the subject of crime in fairly simple terms. He pointed out that many historical works were hopelessly distorted by the ideological and patriotic considerations of their authors. If the public was interested in historical *truth* (the word that obsessed Chandler's cotemporaries), one had to turn precisely to court records. They could offer a far more accurate picture of American culture and "show man 'as he is in action and principle, and not as he is usually drawn by poets and speculative philosophers'" (1.iv). Chandler adhered to the notion that historians should pay attention to what people actually do rather than what they claim to be doing.

This approach reflected Chandler's belief that knowledge of history was necessary not so much for the sake of factual accuracy but for the very survival of the nation as a republic it aspired to be. As he saw it, Americans' misconceptions about their past threatened the country's future. He made this point clear when he was asked to deliver a Fourth of July oration in Boston in 1844. Speaking in front of people who gathered to celebrate the achievements of their country, he bluntly reproached them for their

jubilant spirit. He told them that they enveloped themselves with “a cloud of vanity and self-love through which the light of truth can never penetrate” (*Morals of Freedom* 6) He went on to say that his compatriots were guilty of “proclaiming in trumpet tones our virtues and our valor” while “pointing out, with wonderful minuteness, the vices, the follies and the crimes of others” (11). He even adopted the tone of a biblical prophet to make some gloomy predictions: “The period of declamation and retrospective boasting has passed away. A more sombre hue now rests upon the day.” It was a time for “a serious investigation into our real condition” (5).

Chandler’s warning was not baseless. The majority of Americans were actually aware of the sharp contrast between their aspirations and the problems that befell the country. There were, to be sure, many reasons to be confident in the republic’s prospects. For ardent American patriots, this was a period of America’s great promise. The country gained large territories in the West and reached the Pacific Ocean. The phrase Manifest Destiny captured the spirit of the day. It was believed that the United States was a nation of superior values, and as such it was justified and destined to grow and extend its influence throughout North America, perhaps even beyond. In the words of John L. O’Sullivan, who coined the phrase Manifest Destiny, “our country is destined to be *the great nation of futurity*” (426). Americans were champions of “human liberty, civilization, and refinement,” and they were entering what he called “the era of American greatness” and “boundless future” (426, 427). In jubilant tone, he announced that “we are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement” (429). In 1851, Emerson Davis boastfully called the first half of the nineteenth century as “the most remarkable the world has ever known. The progress of liberty, education, and religion has been very great. Intellectual and moral culture and the arts of civilized life have received a new impulse” (x).

These words look great on page. For the majority of Americans, however, the realities were not inspiring. The economy, in the aftermath of the panic of 1837, was awfully unpredictable. The growing economic inequality among Americans was so frightening that it could not be ignored or concealed by any assurances that the country was founded on the principles of equality. It was particularly evident in the cities, where the contrast between opulence and poverty was painfully clear. What is more, the growing number of immigrants from non-Protestant countries terrified many Americans, who were convinced that the country's traditional Protestant values were being eroded under the invasion of foreigners. The contentious question of slavery made things seem even worse. A contemporary cartoon "Our Peculiar Domestic Institutions" (1840) captured the state of cultural pessimism at the time by highlighting the utter corruption and depravity of the American society: abuse of slaves, gambling, dueling, and other unpleasant details (Fig. 0.1).



Figure 0.1: "Our Peculiar Domestic Institutions" (1839).



Figure 0.2: The explosion of the steamboat Helen McGregor in 1830.

The press and popular literature of the period oscillated between defiant confidence in democratic principles and sheer gloom. Newspapers, enjoying an unprecedented journalistic boom, mixed news of great achievements with alarming reports of sensational crimes and spectacular disasters. Guide books painted dazzling images of Boston and New York while popular novels depicted cities as crime ridden hellholes. Some alarmists even resorted to apocalyptic imagery to reiterate the country's grave prospects. And why not? Judging by the headlines, the country was in an abysmal state. Banks collapsed. Trains derailed. Steamboats exploded. Poverty was rampant. Images of horrific disasters were in fact occasionally turned into metaphors of America's questionable future (Fig. 0.2). As George Lippard warned in his popular novel *The Quaker City; or, the Monks of Monk Hall* (1844), it was only a matter of time before the country's democratic principles would be forgotten, and it would turn into some form of godless tyranny.

One of the most striking examples of Americans' doubts about their country's future is Thomas Cole's series of paintings "The Course of the Empire" (1833-6), which was completed during Andrew Jackson's turbulent presidency. They depict an imaginary country and trace its rise and fall. The first two paintings, "The Savage State" and "The Arcadian or Pastoral State," show a primitive but uncorrupted society—perhaps the kind of society some founders of the American republic envisioned for their country. With time, as we see in the third painting, "The Consummation of Empire," that society became a decadent and arrogant empire, but, as the next painting shows, that empire ultimately collapsed (Figs. 0.3 and 0.4). Was it, Cole implied in his paintings, the fate of the American republic, which his generation saw transformed into a grandiose and self-righteous empire?

The unprecedented proliferation of sensationalist literature in the antebellum period in the United States was precipitated by what Americans regarded as cultural and political contradictions of their democratic experiment. The diversity of sensationalist materials that emerged in that period was stunning: the flash press, urban gothic novels, seduction tales, various forms of crime literature, pornography, radical reform literature, and other genres in which social concerns were blended with the public's voyeuristic fascination with the scandalous. It is worth noticing that the popularity of such works was far greater than the fame enjoyed by the major literary figures of what became known as the American Renaissance. As David S. Reynolds so extensively demonstrated in *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, sensationalism dominated the literary market and even made an undeniable impact on the formation of the American literary canon. The writers such as Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman were not only aware of popular sensationalism but also appreciative of its techniques.



Figures 0.3 & 0.4: Thomas Cole's "Consummation of the Empire" and "Destruction" (1836).

A number of recent scholarly works reveal the diversity of American sensationalism in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> What has not been sufficiently discussed, however, is the question of how American sensationalism came into existence—the subject which I explore in this work. At a first glance, one can easily get the impression that the outbreak of sensationalism in the United States in the nineteenth century was a spontaneous phenomenon; it can be perceived as a reflection of the radically democratic spirit of the new republic and of the social concerns that defined that tumultuous period. To some extent, this assumption is reasonable. We should certainly recognize the relation between the turbulence of the Jacksonian America and the sensational character of literature that emerged at that time. We should also acknowledge that the social upheavals of the 1840s and 1850s could not help but encourage the sensationalist streak in American media. But such theories about origins of American sensationalism are limited in their scope. As I argue in this work, the outbreak of sensationalism in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century was not spontaneous. It grew out of a long tradition of sensationalism which is yet to be recognized in its extent and influence.

Overall, my argument relies on three specific assertions. First, American writers started to rely on various sensationalist techniques right from the beginning of the Puritan colonization—much earlier than what is commonly perceived as the first

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<sup>1</sup> David S. Reynolds' *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995) offer extensive surveys of American popular literature in the nineteenth century. Some other recent works should be mentioned in this regard: Amy Gilman Srebnick's *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), David M. Stewart's "Reading American Sensationalism: Print, Pleasure, and the Disorder of Books, 1830-1870" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Chicago, 1997), David John Anthony's "White-Collar Gothic: Tabloid Masculinity and Urban Sensationalism in Antebellum America" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Michigan, 1998), and Paul Joseph Erickson's "Welcome to Sodom: The Cultural Work of City-Mysteries Fiction in Antebellum America" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Texas, 2005).

eruption of literary sensationalism in the aftermath of the American Revolution. Second, sensationalist techniques in American literature can be discerned not only in second-rate publications but also in what is considered legitimate and artistic forms of writing, including religious sermons, political addresses, and respectable literary works. Third, I argue that various manifestations of sensationalist rhetoric and scandals were not disconnected but formed a discernable tradition that influenced many nineteenth-century writers. Consequently, my study follows the formation of American rhetorical and literary conventions from 1620 to 1860 in terms of scandalous situations, their contemporary receptions, and their long-time impact on American culture.

This argument can be extended further. Sensationalism and debates about its place in rhetoric played a crucial role in the formation of the American literary tradition. We can even conclude that American rhetorical history is not a history of enduring conventions. It is propelled by a series of scandals, controversies, and disagreements about those conventions. At no period in American history was there any agreement about the ideas which some readers today perceive as foundational cultural principles. Furthermore, there was no agreement about ways of writing and reading history, which provoked a series of contentious questions of how Americans should perceive their own culture. Does America have a discernable sense of destiny? How to reconcile that destiny, the concept of which continued to evolve in early America, and the realities of everyday life? Should writers emphasize the best or the worst when they write about their culture?

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Concerns about these questions became apparent during the very first decades of European colonization in New England. The future, as the Puritan leaders imagined while crossing the Atlantic, was to become a book which would be read by the rest of the world. "The eyes of all people are upon us," John Winthrop dramatically proclaimed

aboard *Arbella* on the way to New England (*A Model of Christian Charity* 112). He thought that he and his followers were, all at once, writers, characters, and readers of the new history—and as readers they wondered what plotline their story would follow. In one scenario, Winthrop imagined, America would become a perfect example of moral and religious superiority for the entire world: “The Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his owne people and will commaund a blessing upon us in all our wayes.” The other scenario was completely different. The colonists’ mission could become a failure and a shocking tale, “a story and a by-word through the world [that] shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god.” What the prospective colonists wondered, in other words, was whether their history would become a triumphant story of a New Jerusalem or a sad tale of Sodom, a scandalous tale or a delightful book with a great end.

What is so captivating about the Puritans’ sense of their history, which they eventually put into writing that set the tone for future American writers, was that they somehow managed to follow both paths at once. Their records intertwined two radically different ways of depicting American reality. One subplot clearly aimed at the victory of “goodness and truth.” It reflected colonists’ faith in the great prospects of their colony which they saw as nothing less than a holy experiment ordained by God. But there was also another subplot in American history—the one pointing in a completely different direction, toward the triumph of depravity and the colony’s eventual demise. Apocalyptic fears and fantasies characterized American rhetoric almost from the moment colonists arrived in the New World. The Puritans habitually terrified themselves by imagining their downfall, all the while clinging to the hope of their triumph. This sentiment gave rise to an enduring tradition of sensationalism and shaped Americans’ perception of their history.

Such an odd juxtaposition of two completely different visions of American culture is one of the most recognizable characteristics of American rhetoric. It blends expressions of hope with utmost pessimism, faith in glorious future with apocalyptic visions. Such contradictions in fact lent the American history all the recognizable attributes of a typical nineteenth-century sensationalist novel. Its pages are populated with despicable characters such as wayward ministers, whores, murderers, sodomites, and scores of other incorrigible sinners. It often seems that they are about to overrun the entire country and destroy all the hopes with which it was established. But then *something shifts*. Criminals succumb to their nascent urge to repent. Prostitutes raise their eyes to the sky. Good-hearted heroes regain their strength. And, to the reader's joy, the plot reacquires its direction toward a good end that echoes the promise of America's great destiny. Thus the two plotlines, each pointing in different direction, become inseparable. The notions of scandalous and moral collide. Each depends on the other to define its contours. The question we might ask today, therefore, is not which of the two paths American writers followed but which of the two intertwining plotlines we choose to discern in the literature of the past. Do we read American history as a scandalous story or a cleaned-up morality tale? Should we bother examining the monsters that pop up here and there or immediately side ourselves with moral exorcists who cast them away? Addressing these questions is the least we can do to understand the concerns of early American writers—not how history is made but how to write and read histories of their transgressions.

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To appreciate the extent of early American sensationalism, this work examines a wide array of materials: documents, sermons, as well as works of literature. I pay particular attention to New England, where, as I will argue, writers forged a particularly far-reaching tradition, which we can discern in American rhetoric even in our times.

While many works which I analyze represent what can be described as the dominant religious and political ideology, others exemplify what was often considered a threat to it. Rhetorical tensions among different ways of thinking in the colonial period often burst into scandals but, as I argue, such tensions were not clear-cut. On the surface, the formation of what became the dominant discourse created a lasting tradition of exclusion of any ideology that threatened it. Early New England literature thrived on attacks on what was perceived as harmful religious and intellectual influence in the colonies. At the same time we have to acknowledge that the dominant discourse was continuously revitalized by the ideas that posed a threat to its existence. Although scandals reminded Americans that their religious and intellectual homogeneity was fragile, scandalous events readily lent themselves to the kind of moralizing which was characteristic of Puritan sermons and other forms of dominant discourse. Rather than posing a threat, in other words, ritualistic denunciations of heresies, crimes, and sexual transgressions actually reinforced a sense of cultural coherence in New England. Consequently, the use of sensationalist techniques became an unacknowledged but distinct stylistic requirement in many forms of writing in America, from legal documents to sermons, religious poetry to popular novels.

Two influential scholarly works, Perry Miller's *The Errand into Wilderness* and Sacvan Bercovitch's *American Jeremiad*, indirectly address the subject of sensationalism in early New England. As they persuasively demonstrated, what was characteristic of the Puritan rhetoric was that it was defined by a juxtaposition of optimism and pessimism which colonists felt about their endeavor. To be more accurate, American Puritans articulated their optimism through utterly pessimistic visions of impending doom. They expressed their hope by emphasizing hopelessness and masking their unshakable optimism with ritualistic expressions of failure. It is understandable that such rhetorical rituals were marked by sensationalist excess of their style.

This rhetorical approach was obviously not new. It drew inspiration from the Bible, particularly the provocative style of such prophets as Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. Their dramatic visions were filled with intimidating and provocative passages angrily denouncing their compatriots' lack of religious zeal, religious tolerance that eroded it, and the complacency of those who chose to ignore the prophets' endless wailing, crude metaphors, and shocking exaggerations. Because of the growing religious diversity of Judea, they compared the country to "a whore" who was not faithful to God. They predicted that their land would become "a heap of ruins" and "a lair of jackals" (Jer 9: 11). They intimidated the public with lengthy sadistic fantasies of the ordeals that awaited the nation. Excess was the prophets' main rhetorical principle. Horror was their main effect.

The prophets' expressions of utter pessimism, however, were not meant to plunge the nation into despair but, reversely, to affirm people's faith in a better future. Ultimately, such prophesies had to be read as rituals of renewing hope by professing complete hopelessness—and this was the strategy which the American Puritans adopted for their purposes. They claimed, as their sermons attested, that their colony was sliding down into a moral inferno. They meticulously tabulated and exposed their sins and inequities while claiming that the society was on the brink of collapse. They endlessly lamented the "Cries of our Miserables," "fearful Whoredoms," and what they called "inexcusable *Degeneracies* and *Apostacies*" in the colonies (Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* 6.37, 7.40, 5.97).<sup>2</sup> They prophesied fearful judgments that awaited the nation. At the same time, their sense of despair was meant to affirm their belief that that they lived in a New Jerusalem. Their "cries of declension and doom," as Bercovitch described Puritan style, "were part of a strategy designed to revitalize the errand" (xiv).

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<sup>2</sup> Pagination in the 1702 edition of Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* is not consistent. The parenthetical references refer to books (chapters) and page numbers.

Puritans merely “acted as if they were damned while presuming that they were saved” (51). What this peculiar strategy entailed was that provocative materials could be used as legitimate and viable sources to reassert important religious, moral, and political precepts. Sensationalism, in other words, was embedded in the very core of the colonists’ rhetoric, which established the trend that continues to exert its influence to this day.

A few things should be mentioned about the difficulties of analyzing sensationalist materials. What is challenging about reading works that rely on sensationalist techniques is that their meaning can never be deduced by taking their claims at face value. The hyperbolic tone of many texts in which Americans recorded their experiences in the New World always raises doubts about the validity and coherence of their utterly negative observations. Was Governor Winthrop right to say that Anne Hutchinson’s activities, which mainly consisted of unsanctioned Bible readings, nearly brought the colony to the brink of collapse? Can we trust Jonathan Edward, an ardent Puritan revivalist, with his assertion that his parishioners were horrible sinners?

Since we have to acknowledge the American Puritans’ optimism about their endeavor, we should also be able to see that their dramatic expressions of failure are somewhat meaningless. One suspects that their claims of failure were necessary only to make shock the public out of its complacency. Their style was a contradictory and provocative rhetorical form in which tabulations of various sins and even apocalyptic images were paradoxically meant to strengthen everyone’s faith in America as a New Jerusalem. Puritans’ “mounting wail of sinfulness” and “literature of self-condemnation,” as Miller characterized the style of first American writers, was merely “a ritualistic incantation” in which their undoubted hope was expressed in shockingly negative reaffirmation of hopelessness (9, 15, 8). What makes it so difficult to analyze such materials is that one can never be sure how to read them—whether to look through

their hyperbolic tone or go so far as to deny their claims entirely. The task of pinpointing the meaning and accuracy of the texts that question their own veracity is daunting. Bercovitch was right to describe New Englanders' rhetorical approach as "a satire of violence nourished by self-deceit, a tragedy of rhetoric turned relentlessly upon itself" (28). How else could such works, in which words were persistently stripped of their meaning in rituals of self-abnegation, convey their points if not by exaggeration and appealing to senses?

As Miller and Bercovitch demonstrated, the rhetorical conventions developed by American Puritans made an enduring impact on future generations. We can discern traces of those conventions in many areas: the contentious arguments over the religious revivals in the early eighteenth century, revolutionary debates of the 1770s, political discourse of the new republic, and even the works of such nineteenth-century writers as Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville. In my view, the trajectory of Puritan influence can be extended further, to include numerous genres of popular sensationalist literature: the urban gothic novel, flash press, crime pamphlets, and many other forms of sensationalism that reached their peak in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Although we have to appreciate Miller's and Bercovitch's efforts to understand the provocative character of American rhetoric, it is important to point out that at least one shortcoming in their approach. They adhered to the notion that culture is defined by a set of enduring concepts. Bercovitch, for example, argued that the concept of the *jeremiad* formed the backbone of American culture. Miller, for his part, put emphasis on the *errand into wilderness* as the concept that perfectly reflected the essence of the New England culture. This approach is shared by many other writers who analyze American culture in terms of its adherence to this or that concept which they see as culturally defining: democracy, freedom of speech, or tolerance. In my view, culture is not defined by some enduring archetypes; it can only be understood in terms of the conflicts that

threaten to tear it apart. A nation's history is not a history of adherence to enduring concepts but a history of scandals and controversies that expose some core disagreements that characterize a particular culture. Consequently, my study focuses on controversies over the concepts which are commonly assumed to be nonnegotiable. It traces some enduring debates that defined the tradition of rhetorical contentiousness, which became one of the most prominent features in American literature, religious rhetoric, and political discourse.

But here we have to acknowledge that to call sensationalism a *tradition* is somewhat misleading. The basic definition of tradition as a set of nonnegotiable and enduring values is not really helpful in our efforts to understand the tradition of sensationalism. After all, the stylistic and rhetorical conventions that formed what can be characterized as a tradition of sensationalism were in themselves objects of contention. In contrast to the culturally defining concepts which are commonly accepted as stable cultural markers, the provocative and morally dubious strategies used in sensationalist rhetoric are often condemned as inappropriate and unethical. This is one of the central paradoxes of the American tradition of sensationalism. On the one hand, a fairly consistent use of sensationalist techniques and the ways in which scandals were exploited in print created a sense of a rhetorical tradition, which is evident in a wide array of texts from the revolutionary and revivalist publications to the literature of the American Renaissance. At the same time, it is remarkable that sensationalist techniques could never be properly acknowledged because their explicit use could easily earn a scornful reaction of the public. The term scandal, for example, always had negative connotations. It was, as one angry journalist commented as he feigned an outrage about people's interest in the scandalous, an "enemy to the peace of individual and society at large," a "weapon of little minds against the superior abilities of another" ("On Scandal"). The public's fascination with the scandalous was habitually decried as "an enjoyment of a

very diabolical nature” (*The Lincoln Intelligencer*, October 10, 1822). It even prompted one concerned activist to propose “a Society for the suppression of Scandal in all its branches” (“Scandal”). What we can see in the statements like these is that the American tradition of exploiting scandalous situations somehow coexisted with the notion that scandals were simply detestable. Such a contradictory attitude reminds us of the dubious status of sensationalism in American rhetoric. Direct appeal to senses—or any form of emotional manipulation which were quite common in early American rhetoric—relies on the *implicit* approval of sensationalism but goes against its *explicit* condemnation. This dichotomy is evident in works which were written as early as the first decades of the Puritan experiment in New England and is still prevalent in American rhetoric to this day.

The origins of this tradition can be found in early Puritan literature. As Eugene E. White observed, Puritan rhetoric reflected “a recognition of the tremendous influence of the emotions,” but its “distinguishing theme . . . echoed that of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*: the listener is a reasonable, reasoning man—a judge; his initial end in listening is to render a rational judgment” (15). Consequently, “the emotions were distrusted and were to be employed in reinforcement of the judgments previously made by the Understanding” (17). This idea is quite apparent in the common structure of the Puritan sermons in which “appeals to the emotions and to the Will were to be made only after the speaker had applied the doctrine to the Understanding” (21). In such Puritan sermons, emotional manipulation was used only in conjunction with sober sermonizing. Likewise, didactic sensationalist novels and documentary works, which grew to dominate the American literature in the nineteenth century, often exploited provocative materials (which appeal to senses) in conjunction with instructive moralizing commentaries (which appeal to intellect). Thus the scandalous was an essential component of early American literature, but sensationalist techniques were always mistrusted to the point of inspiring numerous

debates about their legitimacy. This factor explains why the significance of sensationalism in American literature was generally downplayed by many writers as well as scholars who read their works.

Such conflictedness about the place of sensationalism in American rhetoric made an undeniable impact on the development of the sensationalist tradition. Considering the self-critical, sometimes even self-abhorring character of sensationalism, its history was far more complicated than a simple process of passing a set of rhetorical conventions from one generation to another. Because of the controversial nature of such conventions, every innovation and development in that tradition drew attention to itself and sparked a multi-dimensional debate. A work about sexual impropriety, for example, invariably raised some questions about the appropriateness of discussing that provocative subject. Publications about executions of criminals, which were usually marketed as cautionary tales, could not help but provoke stirring debates about the benefits and dangers of reading such dreadful materials. The same could be said about the works evoking other provocative subjects, particularly political scandals. For this reason, publications which were inspired by a scandalous event usually addressed several issues at once: the scandalous subject itself, the ways of confronting it, and the dangers of discussing it. This is why the tradition of sensationalism is so immensely complicated. Its analysis requires us to understand not only the history of various provocative subjects but also the history of the contentious debates about the legitimacy of works that rely on sensationalist techniques.

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To help us understand the complexity and contradictions of this rhetorical tradition, we can differentiate two basic currents in sensationalist literature. What I call *didactic sensationalism* relies on the principle that various scandalous situations, particularly atrocious crimes and sex scandals, can be exploited in print for seemingly

legitimate purposes. Its proponents see this form of sensationalism as an effective tool to promote important political and religious ideas.

The trend originated in Europe and, with the invention of the press, became tremendously popular with writers of all sorts. They routinely turned war reports, execution accounts, and shocking revelations into moralistic sermons, cautionary tales, and nagging patriotism under the guise of good intentions. One had to be exposed to the scandalous and provocative not only to awaken his dormant affections but also to discipline one's senses to respond to the world around in a prescribed fashion. The method was famously defended by John Milton in his *Areopagitica* (1644), a celebrated attack on religious censorship. Milton's argument summed up the essence of the Puritans' fascination with vice which he shared. "Good and evill we know in the field of this World grow up together almost inseparably," Milton wrote (17). Consequently, to understand the good it was absolutely essential to know evil. Milton had little respect for what he called "cloister'd virtue," the "unexercis'd and unbreath'd" kind of knowledge that grew from the confines of intellectual innocence rather than experience (17). True Christian had to "apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better" (18). It was a provocative argument, which even its proponents occasionally doubted. In fact in *Paradise Lost*, Milton put this idea into Satan's mouth, thus giving the argument a certain Satanic feel. As the demon tries to seduce Eve, he makes a claim that reminds us of Milton's notion that knowledge of good is impossible without some knowledge of evil: "Of evil, if what is evil / Be real, why not known, since easier shunned?" (9.698-9).

In early America, the most recognizable form of didactic sensationalism was the jeremiad, in which shockingly negative imagery was used to awaken and reenergize the audience. In the centuries that followed there emerged many other forms of didactic sensationalism: captivity narratives, crime reports, muckraking, radical reform

publications, to name just a few. As a rule, they were meant achieve their effect by soliciting a prescribed emotion from readers. It is the most important component of didactic sensationalism: the audience has no liberty to choose how to react to the provocative. One has to feel and act exactly how one is expected to feel and act.

This rhetorical approach originated in Europe, but what is remarkable is that didactic sensationalism was so prevalent in early American literature that it ultimately grew to be regarded as a distinctly American form. American writers at the time often claimed that they indulged in the scandalous for no other reason than to promote American values and to warn their compatriots about the dangers that their country faced. What is more, they sought to emphasize the difference between their proper use of sensationalism and sensationalist literature in Europe, much of which, they claimed, was needlessly sensational.

In contrast to didactic sensationalism, what we can call *voyeuristic sensationalism* typically appeals to the public's voyeuristic inclinations and gratuitous obsession with the titillating. Its most well-known manifestations in early modern Europe and America were erotica, pornography, penny press, and gothic novels, in which the provocative and enticing are appreciated merely for the sake of the voyeuristic delight they impart. The reader of voyeuristic literature is free to read it however ever he wants. His reading strategy is not expected to be disciplined in any way. It reflects only his personal inclinations.

Voyeuristic sensationalism was also thought to have originated in Europe, which early American writers commonly depicted as a major source of moral corruption. The antebellum America was so engulfed with European sensationalist literature and erotica that ardent American moralists and popular writers produced some amazingly fiery denunciations of bad foreign influence. What it reminds us is that disagreements about

the proper use of sensationalism reflected American writers' efforts to create distinctly American literature.

Whether they succeed in their efforts will be addressed at length in the following chapters. At first, we will look at the formation of the didactic tradition of sensationalism, whose proponents tried to codify its conventions while resisting other forms of sensationalism. Ultimately, however, the tradition they created was fraught with contradictions. What is more, Americans were so fond of alternative sensationalist literature that they eagerly consumed European racy crime novels, erotica, and even pornography. As we will see, the popularity of such materials was so tremendous that American popular writers, including those who professed their cultural patriotism, could not avoid the temptation of adopting some elements of voyeuristic sensationalism in their writings. The way it was done reveals a great deal about the intricacies of early American literature, which is remarkable for its elaborate juxtaposition of different forms of sensationalism.

## CHAPTER I

### RELIGIOUS TENSIONS IN THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND

“Experience will teach Churches and Christians that it is far better to live in a State united, though somewhat Corrupt, than in a State whereof some Part is incorrupt and all the rest divided.”

“I dare take upon me, to be the Herald of *New-England* so far, as to proclaim to the World, in the name of our Colony, that all Familists, Antinomians, Anabaptists, and other Enthusiasts shall have free Liberty to keep away from us, and such as will come to be gone as fast they can, the sooner the better.”

Nathaniel Ward

*The Simple Cobler of Aggawam in America, 1647*

**Précis:** Although many New England settlements were established with hope of creating a homogeneous social order, the colonists' efforts were quickly mired in tensions and scandals. This chapter surveys some controversial issues, particularly the proliferation of enthusiastic and radical sects in the 1640s and 1650s, which on many occasions caused tensions among colonists. At first, conflicts over these issues were confined chiefly to ecclesiastical matters; they reflected concerns about religious order and proper forms of worship. With time, tensions over these issues extended to other areas and became reflected in political discourse and early American literature.

## BASIC CAUSES OF RELIGIOUS TENSIONS IN NEW ENGLAND

The majority of those who migrated to New England in the early seventeenth century were certainly not inclined to promote any form of sensationalism. In fact, when they made it to the New World, the new Americans made great efforts to avoid engaging in conflicts and tensions. We are often reminded that the two main groups of colonists in New England, Separatists and Puritans, journeyed across the Atlantic to escape the religious chaos in England and to keep away from what they saw as the corrupting influence of the country's official church, the Church of England. The first to arrive, in 1620, was a group of Separatists who founded the colony of Plymouth. To remove themselves from the Church of England's grasp, they went so far as to settle across the ocean in what one disheartened Pilgrim described as the "hideous and desolate wilderness" of America (Bradford 60). Their journey was followed a decade later by the Great Migration of English Puritans, another group of religious nonconformists. Although they were not as radical as the Separatists in their attitude toward the Church of England, they felt compelled to leave England as well. Regardless of these differences between the Separatists and Puritans, what made them alike was that they did not move to New England to start a great debate about religion and politics. The majority of colonists, including the elite, did not care much for religious and political diversity and tolerance at all. Their plan was to create a vibrant yet uniform social order, a colony which would be completely free of the religious conflicts prevalent in the Old World.

The new Americans' vision of their mission in the New World was shaped, to a large extent, by their experiences in Europe. Puritanism was a radical Protestant movement. It emerged in England in the middle of the sixteenth century in opposition to what its proponents saw as undue Catholic influence in the Church of England, the country's national church. The first stirrings of this movement were discernable soon

after England's break with Catholicism. In the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547), the English Parliament adopted several acts, according to which English churches were declared ecclesiastically independent from the authority of the Pope, while the ruling English monarch was recognized as "the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England" ("The Act Concerning the King's Highness" 364). These developments coincided with the rise of Protestantism in Europe, whose adherents decried Catholicism as a pseudo-Christian cult that deviated from the pure Christianity bequeathed by the early followers of Jesus Christ. Although Henry VIII did not intend to move the country in the Protestant direction, he inadvertently opened the door to Protestantism, which many English reformers, including those who several decades later filled the Puritan ranks, wanted England to embrace.

While Protestantism made notable advances in England in the reigns of Henry's successors Edward VI (1547-53) and Elizabeth I (1558-1603), what some reformers complained about was that the newly created Church of England retained many elements of Catholic worship. They argued that a true Christian church should be founded only on the principles mentioned in the scriptures; they wholeheartedly believed that the Bible had to be the only source of authority in religious matters. Therefore, they wanted to purify the Church of England of all the vestiges of Catholicism, many of which they saw as scripturally baseless. It was their hope for a pure church that earned then the name Puritan.

In their theological views, the majority of those reformers were followers of the French theologian John Calvin (1507-1564), one of the most important figures of the Protestant Reformation. His work *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1543) highlights the main principles of his theology. Most importantly, Calvin called upon Christians to treat the Bible as the only authority for rituals and faith. Consequently, he rejected many Catholic ceremonies and teachings which the Bible does not explicitly

mention. In particular, he condemned such staples of Catholicism as the veneration of saints, the use of the sacraments, and the doctrine of transubstantiation.

English reformers fell under Calvin's influence during their exile in Switzerland, where many of them escaped during the brief but bloody reign of Mary I (1553-8) as she forcefully tried to revert England back to Catholicism. The succession of Elizabeth I in 1558, who was nominally a Protestant, allowed them to return to England and begin their efforts to reform the newly resurrected Church of England, which they believed was still mired in quasi-Catholic rituals.<sup>3</sup> To advance their causes, the reformers wanted to replace the existing church structure with either a more decentralized or more independent (from the crown) church. They did not succeed. The reformers' hopes of purifying the Church of England suffered some major setbacks right in the beginning of Elizabeth's reign. Although a Protestant, Elizabeth was a pragmatic politician who inherited the country which was torn by Protestant radicals and their pro-Catholic opponents. In what became known as the Elizabethan Settlement of Religion (1559), the queen attempted to find a compromise between the reformers and Catholic sympathizers by making concession to both. She allowed some Protestant rituals in the Church of England while preserving many elements of Catholic worship as well. Unsurprisingly, many Protestant reformers found this arrangement utterly unsatisfactory.

In their reaction to the Elizabethan Settlement, Protestant dissenters can be divided into two basic categories. One group was formed by those who remained members of the Church of England but continued to advocate its purification. They are called non-separating Puritans, or simply Puritans. Another group consisted of the

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<sup>3</sup> Most notably, the Puritans disapproved of ministers wearing the surplice, because it perpetrated the notion that the clergy was closer to God than other people. The reformers' rejection of the concept of transubstantiation led them to reject kneeling in receiving the sacrament. In addition, they condemned some other rituals, such as the use of the wedding ring and marking of a baptized person with a sign of a cross, because they maintained that there was no scriptural basis for such rituals.

reformers who were so dissatisfied with the Church of England that they chose to separate entirely from it. They became known as Separating Puritans, or Separatists.

Both Separatists and Puritans advocated churches' relative independence from the crown and were persecuted for what was considered their anarchical and quasi-republican ideas. Elizabeth I reacted harshly to any criticism of her religious order. Her successors James I (reigned 1603-1625) and Charles I (reigned 1625-1649) were even more intolerant of religious dissent, regarding it as a threat to monarchy. Although both kings considered themselves Calvinists, they did not appreciate Puritans' open criticism of the crown and the Church of England.

The government's opposition to the Puritans and Separatists was, to some extent, their own fault. Both of these groups earned much notoriety for their radicalism and methods of advocating reforms. Their intolerant streak was undeniable. Puritans and Separatists self-righteously detested those who disagreed with them. They convinced themselves that the majority of intellectuals were simply over-educated heretics.<sup>4</sup> What is more, the dissenters tirelessly decried their opponents in print, using cheap broadsides and pamphlets to provoke their adversaries. Thus the Puritans threatened to derail the government's efforts to suppress religious tensions in the fragile kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

The dissenters' radicalism and their opposition to the central church certainly did not mean that they appreciated religious diversity. The Puritans' hopes for religious homogeneity—and their detestation of religious diversity—reflected their belief that there could be only one true religious order. This belief was particularly prevalent among those Puritans who left Europe for America. Nathaniel Ward, one of the principle

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<sup>4</sup> A comment in the Geneva Bible, which the dissenters revered as the authoritative Bible, reveals the extent of dissenters' intolerance; it compared "Archbishops, and Bishops, Doctors, Bachelors, and Masters which forsake Christ to maintain false doctrine" to the locusts of apocalypse (Knappen 144).

<sup>5</sup> For a survey of the early Puritan literature, see the "Literature of Conflict" and "More Battles of Books" chapters in Henry Dexter's *The England and Holland of the Pilgrims* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1905).



Figure 1.1: John Foster's woodcut of Richard Mather (ca. 1670).

Puritan leaders in New England, expressed the Puritans' antipathy toward religious diversity in simple terms: "He that is willing to tolerate any Religion . . . besides his own . . . either doubts of his own, or is not sincere in it" (*The Simple Cobbler of Aggawam* 9). Ward believed himself to be a true Puritan by emphasizing that he "naturally detested . . . Tolerations of divers Religions, or of one Religion in segregant shapes" (7). He recalled in horror the religious diversity which he had witnessed in

Europe before coming to America: "I lived in a City, where a Papist Preached in one Church, a Lutheran in another, a Calvinist in a third; a Lutheran one part of the day, a Calvinist the other, in the same Pulpit: the Religion of that Place was but a motly and meager, their affections Leopard-like" (7). To many American Puritans, such diversity made no sense at all. Their colony was meant to be established on simple principles derived from the scriptures. It was meant to be a true Christian commonwealth.

One cannot help but notice this idea even in the way Puritan leaders, such as Richard Mather, John Cotton, John Davenport, and Increase Mather, preferred to be depicted in portraits (Fig. 1.1). Each of them is captured in a symbolic pose; as if collating the page and the world around, he points his finger toward the Bible while casting his gaze upon the viewer. What it meant was that colonists were supposed to adhere to the

principles found in the Bible. If they did that, there would be no conflicts and New England would become a perfect and homogeneous religious society that could be replicated anywhere in the world.<sup>6</sup>

This plan did not work at all. New England was not destined to become a harmonious religious sanctuary—at least not for decades to come. Almost from the onset of colonization the settlers' hopes of homogeneity were quickly shattered by a growing number of contentious debates and scandals that steadily fragmented the colonies geographically, politically, and intellectually. The issues at stake were numerous. What constituted acceptable forms of worship? Who was entitled to church membership? What should be relationship between religious and civil authorities? If it was true, as sometimes argued, that the settlers came to New England to create a shining example of political order to be emulated by their English brethren, they certainly failed. The colonial culture they created was characterized by its contentiousness, not its uniformity.

There were several reasons for this trend. The most apparent one is the colonists' religious extremism. Their leaders tended to dislike not only those who disagreed with them but also their sympathizers who did not share their views with equal passion. It is understandable that when the Puritans arrived in New England, their plans were almost immediately criticized by dissenters within the Puritan movement and other settlers who either challenged or simply ridiculed the religious principles to which the Puritan colony was meant to adhere.

Harassment and banishment of those whose presence in the colonies was deemed undesirable were fairly common. The settlers who did not share Puritan or Separatist views were easy targets. William Blackstone, an Anglican who moved to the Bay in 1623,

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<sup>6</sup> John Foster's woodcut of Richard Mather (ca. 1670) is based on an oil painting by an unknown artist, both of which are in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society. The Connecticut Historical Society owns a portrait assumed to be that of John Cotton. John Davenport's portrait is at Yale University Art Gallery. John van der Spriett's portrait of Increase Mather (1688) is housed at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

was one of the first victims. When Puritans started to settle in the area in the late 1620s, Blackstone ran into so many disagreements with his new neighbors that he was forced to resettle away from Boston. In 1624 the Plymouth authorities banished another man, a minister named John Lyford, who was accused of writing disparaging letters about the Separatist cause (Bradford 192-7). Other cases followed. Samuel Brown and his brother, two Anglicans who arrived at Plymouth in 1629, were deported for holding private religious gatherings and reading *The Book of Common Prayer* (a standard of Anglican worship). They were accused of inciting “Mutiny and Faction” and were promptly sent back to Europe. As one contemporary commentator remarked, “New-England *was no place [for] such as they*” (Morton 105). Two years later, in 1631, the authorities convicted, mutilated, and banished Philip Ratcliff for his “most foul, scandalous invectives against our churches and government” (Winthrop, *History* 1.56).

Those who did not share the colonists’ sense of propriety were routinely banished as well. Christopher Gardiner was deported in 1631 for what was regarded as improper sexual behavior; a seemingly devout man, he was suspected of having a concubine “after the Italian manner” (Nathaniel Morton 116). One Thomas Gray was not only banished but also had his property destroyed (Winthrop, *History* 1.85). Finally, the misdemeanors and trials of Thomas Morton, an adventurous and flamboyant English entrepreneur, scandalized the authorities so much that he barely escaped execution. He moved to Massachusetts in 1622 to make a fortune in trade and, he sometimes admitted, to harass his Separatist neighbors whose religious austerity he utterly despised. He was accused of a number of crimes, including inappropriate socializing with the natives, sexual relations with Indian women, heathenism, and other subversive activities. Morton was imprisoned and deported in 1630. When he returned to New England in 1642, he was immediately

arrested and, if it was not for his declining health, would have probably been executed.<sup>7</sup> It is undeniable that the strictness of the colonists' religious views created numerous scandalous situations that involved people who either refused or were unable to comply with Puritan ideals of normalcy.

We should also acknowledge conflicts within the Puritan ranks. The Congregationalist principles, on which the majority of New England churches were organized, suggest that the Puritans actually recognized that they could not always be in agreement on every religious issue. The basic premise of Congregationalism is that people can form churches (congregations) and choose their ministers. Such a proto-democratic approach reflected New Englanders' desire to move away from the centralized forms of governing typical of the Catholic Church and the Church of England. This did not mean, of course, that different groups of colonists could found any church they wanted. Although congregations enjoyed some autonomy, they were expected to conform to the basic principles of Puritanism. As stipulated in the Massachusetts *Body of Liberties*, a set of laws adopted by the General Court in 1641, "Every Church hath free libertie of Election and ordination of all their officers from time to time, provided they be able, pious and orthodox" (95.3). The gap between the requirement that churches remain "orthodox" and the assertion of their "full libertie to exercise all the ordinances of god" (95.2) was probably intentional. What it entailed was that different congregations were ostensibly committed to the same cause while occasionally pursuing independent

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Morton recalled his experiences in the colonies in *New English Canaan* (London, 1637). William Bradford offers his version of the Morton scandal in *History of Plymouth Plantation* (236-45). The circumstances of Morton's conflict with the authorities inspired a number of literary tributes, including Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Maypole of Merry Mount" (1837), John Lothrop Motley's two-volume novel *Merry-Mount: A Romance of Massachusetts Colony* (1849), R. L. Stokes's opera *Merry Mount* (1934) and L.F. Davidson's 1964 novel *The Disturber*. For more extensive discussions of Morton's influence on American culture, see Richard Clark Sterne's "Puritans at Merry Mount: Variations on a Theme" (*American Quarterly*, 22.4 [1970]: 846-58) and Michael Zuckerman's "Pilgrims in the Wilderness: Community, Modernity, and the Maypole at Merry Mount" (*The New England Quarterly*, 50.2 [1977]: 255-77).

agendas.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the character of congregations varied throughout New England, creating a relatively diverse religious environment of different forms of Puritanism.<sup>9</sup>

It is remarkable that at the time when some colonial leaders worked hard to promote consensus, the New England elite was torn in disputes. A number of high profile figures who found themselves in disagreement with their powerful colleagues were driven into exile, left the colony on their own accord, or had to endure years of tacit persecution for their views. The banishment of Roger Williams, a fairly well-known minister, was only a prelude to series of religious scandals in the late 1630s and 1640s. His expulsion in 1636 was prompted by his radically Separatist views, which were far more extreme than those of anyone in Massachusetts, even in the Separatist stronghold of Plymouth. He lambasted the Church of England as an illegitimate institution and held in contempt those who swore their allegiance to Old England. His intentionally provocative sermons antagonized the authorities so much that he was forced to stand a trial for what was described as “divers dangerous opinions” (Winthrop, *The History of New England* 1.162). He left Boston in 1635 and went on to establish the Providence Plantation, which was founded on principles much different from those of his Puritan neighbors.

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<sup>8</sup> It is possible that the organization of Puritan congregations reflected the nuances of the Protestant vision of individuals’ relationship to God. As David Mikics reminds us, Protestantism is characterized by a notable “division between the private sense of faith and the grand scheme of sacred history” (4). Protestant theologians emphasized the value of individualism in religious matters. It is evident, for example, in that they encouraged Christians to make individual efforts to think about God by reading the Bible. At the same time, such Protestant theologians as Martin Luther and John Calvin repeatedly made it clear that their notion of individualism was not meant to be viewed as an endorsement of political freedom. In fact, they even rejected the concept of free will, arguing that Christians had to recognize their powerlessness against God’s mysterious plan for this world.

<sup>9</sup> The authorities’ concerns about dissent among different congregations are quite apparent in section 95.11 of the Massachusetts *Body of Liberties*. It outlines ways of “preventing and removeing of errour and offense that may grow and spread in any of the Churches in this Jurisdiction.” The law created venues for “conference and consultations” among ministers of different congregations to encourage them to look for consensus.

The Williams episode barely forgotten, the authorities had to confront another streak of radical nonconformism in their own ranks. Anne Hutchinson, who took the liberty of leading unsanctioned religious discussions, was tried and banished in 1638 after a contentious trial in the General Court. She left for Rhode Island

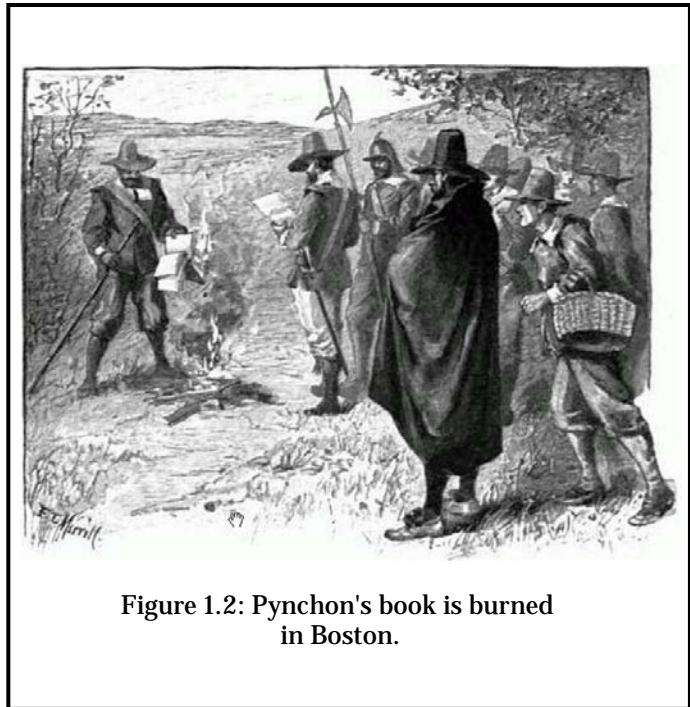


Figure 1.2: Pynchon's book is burned in Boston.

and eventually settled at Pelham Bay, north of New Amsterdam. Her supporter Henry Vane, who served as a governor in 1636-7, was unseated by John Winthrop in the contentious election of 1637 and chose to leave for Europe. John Wheelwright and William Coddington, who also shared Hutchinson's views, were exiled as well; they went on to establish churches in different parts of New England, thus contributing to the region's religious diversity.

Even more scandalous were the trials of Samuel Gorton, a radical minister who was so infamous for his contempt for organized religion—particularly of the sort promoted by the American Puritans—that he came close to being executed for blasphemy. He was banished by the Winthrop government in 1644, only to return four years later to reestablish himself as an important political figure; he helped establish a settlement at Warwick, Rhode Island.<sup>10</sup> The fate of John Pynchon was different; a

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<sup>10</sup> After he was banished from Massachusetts, Samuel Gorton composed an account of his ordeal in New England: *Simplicities Defence against Seven-Headed Policy, or Innocency Vindicated, Being Unjustly Accused, and Sorely Censured, by That Seven-Headed Church-Government United in New-England: or That Servant so Imperious in His Masters Absence*

prominent figure in the 1640s (he helped establish the settlement of Springfield), he ran into serious trouble for publishing a book in which he questioned Calvinist principles. The General Court reacted by banning the book and burning all the copies which could be found. Pynchon was asked to recant, but he chose to leave the colony to avoid renouncing his views. The fact that some of his sympathizers stayed behind suggests that Massachusetts was not as homogeneous as its founders wished.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, if we look at the map of seventeenth-century New England, which stretched from Maine to Connecticut, it is obvious that English settlements were not wholeheartedly committed to the same cause. The settlements' political organization, the degree of their autonomy, and their religious composition varied so much, that when England united them in 1684 into one political entity called the Dominion of New England, settlers complained as much about their loss of autonomy as the fact they had little appreciation for each other.

To appreciate the contentiousness of New England's social climate, it is also important to point out that disagreements among colonists were apparent not only in the high-profile cases such as those of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson but also in more subtle tensions among different religious and political factions. Not all colonists who were dissatisfied with the religious situation in Massachusetts chose to leave or were exiled—many stayed and made their discontent known one way or the other. Throughout the seventeenth century New England continued to attract radicals who challenged its fragile notion of orthodoxy. The colony also saw an influx of people who did not share the Puritans' views or did not care much about religion at all, which was particularly the case in the late seventeenth century. Consequently, there was a notable contrast between

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*Revived, and Now Thus Re-Acting in Nevv-England* (London, 1646). See also the "Massachusetts versus Samuel Gorton" chapter in Robert Emmet Wall Jr.'s *Massachusetts Bay: the Crucial Decade, 1640-1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed discussion of William Pynchon's theological views in relation to Puritanism, see Chapter 11 of Philip Gura's *A Glimpse of Sion's Glory* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984).

the sense of uniformity promoted by some leaders and the pervasive diversity of colonist views. The colonists' sense of religious unity was, in short, elusive.<sup>12</sup>

In recent decades, historians and literary scholars have begun to move away from the enduring notion that New England was a monolithic culture and are now recognizing its diversity and vibrancy. More recently, Janice Knight offered an extensive analysis of the causes for and extent of disagreements in colonial New England in *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism*, in which she argued that “the conflicts in early New England proved a concrete instance in which orthodoxy emerged as dominant, but its dominance was neither absolute nor exclusive” (5). Other scholars went on to emphasize the important point that disagreements among the colonists were not only common but also essential in shaping the religious environment in New England. As Phillip Gura explains, “in large measure New England Puritanism developed as it did because of, and not in spite of, the criticism of the colony from those in the population whose vision of the kingdom of God in America differed significantly from John Winthrop’s” (6). Larzer Ziff accurately points out that New England “needed its quota of sinners,” because disagreements and scandals helped create a sense of religious and social coherence which was necessary to confront dissent (77). To quote Stephen Foster,

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<sup>12</sup> Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch are often singled out as scholars who promoted the notion that the Puritan world was monolithic. Miller is particularly well known for his insistence that New England was shaped by Puritan orthodoxy. As he wrote, “the first three generations in New England paid almost unbroken allegiance to a unified body of thought, and that individual differences among particular writers or theorists were merely minor variations within a general frame” (*The New England Mind: Seventeenth Century* vii). Bercovitch’s views on the subject are more nuanced. He was certainly aware of New England’s cultural and religious diversity while at the same time pointing the endurance and importance of some rhetorical patterns that gave New England a sense of social coherence: “My argument concerns *ideological* consensus—not a quantitatively measures ‘social reality,’ but a series (equally ‘real’) rituals of socializations, and a comprehensive, officially endorsed cultural myth that became entrenched in New England . . . Insofar as my argument tends to simplify social and economic conflicts, psychic tensions, and regular disparities, it does so in order to stress the growth of a certain mode of rhetoric and vision” (xii-xiii).

The genius of the American Puritans ordinarily lay in the direction of papering over fundamental division. After a certain amount of heartburning, some sort of formula would be produced that harnessed the energies of the diverging parties under a single standard, and the Puritans emerged the stronger for their ability to embrace differing religious impulses in a single movement. (650)

This point is important because it reminds us that contentiousness was ultimately engrained in American rhetoric. While many scandalous situations in New England were not necessarily connected, ways of confronting them eventually grew to rely on certain recognizable techniques that formed a discernable rhetorical tradition. To discern it, we should trace the debates about some particularly contentious issues that often caused disagreements in New England: enthusiasm, common sense, and antinomianism, all of which provoked a series of enduring debates in the colonies.

#### ANTINOMIANISM AND ENTHUSIASM

Broadly defined, *antinomianism* (in Greek, *against law*) is the notion that laws cannot be properly codified and should therefore be viewed as either conditional or simply irrelevant. At different points in history, the antinomian label was often indiscriminately applied to people who questioned, on different grounds, the importance of various laws. The term has similar connotations in religion. It refers to the idea that an authentic religious experience is possible only through a direct contemplation of the divine rather than systematic religious rituals and appreciation of religious tenets; it assumes that one's faith is entirely sufficient to sustain spiritual needs. Although this concept might not seem radical to us today (it is shared by many people who call themselves more spiritual than religious), one has to understand its controversial nature, particularly in

the Puritan New England. If antinomian ideas are taken far enough, they can lead to the conclusion that one is not really obliged to accept the validity of sacred texts—at least not to accept them at face value—because, among other things, language is not a reliable medium when it comes to spiritual matters. In this respect, antinomian tendencies challenge the credibility of church fathers’ writings and even of the Bible itself. Take this one step further and it becomes easy to see that antinomianism, with its emphasis on the idea that one should seek more unmediated contact with the divine, poses a serious threat to the authority of religious institutions.

In the seventeenth century, antinomianism was usually discussed in conjunction with *enthusiasm*, another radical concept. *Enthousiasmos* literally means *having god within* oneself. The concept relies on the assumption that one’s understanding of God (perhaps even one’s connection with God) can be achieved by discerning signs of divine presence within oneself rather than by searching for divine knowledge in sacred texts. As the argument goes, one can sense such signs in stirrings of passions and emotions which, if properly appreciated, can heighten one’s perception and enable one to grasp the ineffable. This idea would later become quite popular among Romantic poets who believed that our ability to understand higher truths depends on manipulating our perception. Quite understandably, enthusiasm was often decried as a form of deceptive irrationality. Enthusiasts’ preoccupation with emotions and passions was believed to impair their minds to the point that they could not tell the difference between the real and the imaginary. John Locke’s condemnation of enthusiasm offers quite a standard example of how his contemporaries viewed this concept: enthusiasm was “founded neither on reason nor divine revelation, but rising from the conceits of a warmed or overweening brain” (*Essay* 4.19.7). An enthusiastic person can therefore be compared to a false prophet who mistakes stirrings of his emotions for signs of divine presence or the voice of God.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers often used the terms antinomianism and enthusiasm interchangeably. To New Englanders, the difference between these terms was not as important as the prevalent belief that these trends posed a grave threat to the religious and political order in the colonies. As such, these labels were applied to any number of people and sects: John Cotton, Anne Hutchinson, Baptists, Familists, Quakers, and many others.

The most well-known episode that underscores the colonists' concerns about this subject was what became known as the Antinomian controversy of 1636-8. Its main culprit was the now-famous Anne Hutchinson, the woman who scandalized the colony with her defiance of the Massachusetts General Court where she was tried for heresy. Her crime in itself was quite innocent by our standards. Shortly after arriving in New England in 1634, she began to organize discussion groups at her home, where visitors could discuss the Bible and religious issues. What transpired in those meetings was not immediately clear, but even before the magistrates had a chance to examine Hutchinson's ideas, there was reason for alarm. The most apparent problem, of course, was that such gatherings clearly undermined the standing of the official churches. Hutchinson's discussions took place in her home, not in a church. Officials feared that this detail could create the impression that religious institutions were inept in addressing people's spiritual needs. Furthermore, it was rumored that Hutchinson took it upon herself to make religious law a subject of free discussion rather than an accepted principle.

Had Hutchinson's voice been isolated, the authorities might have ignored her. After all, the colony had its share of other dissenters and radicals. What motivated Hutchinson's prosecutors to take her case seriously was their realization that her teachings, the antinomian character of which became obvious in subsequent interrogations, were not only quite radical but also shared by a fairly large number of

colonists. She enjoyed the support of common people as well as such well-known colonists as John Cotton and Henry Vane. Her popularity, in other words, betrayed a schism within the Puritan elite and, consequently, threatened to undermine the colonists' fragile sense of unity.

Other reasons for Hutchinson's popularity were also disquieting. It exposed the contentious issue of gender inequality. We should take a note that the majority of the discussants in Hutchinson's reading group were women. Their fascination with Hutchinson's initiative suggested that many of them felt uncomfortable with a religious culture that favored men over women; after all, Puritan teachers repeatedly stressed that women were less likely than men to gain expertise in theological matters. This factor undoubtedly contributed to the Antinomian controversy, unsurprisingly mixing the subjects of sex and religion.<sup>13</sup>

An even more serious cause for alarm was Hutchinson's theological views. As the magistrates saw it, she promoted extreme individualism in religious matters. It was particularly evident in her claim that she was obliged to follow only "what in my conscience I know to be truth," not what religious teachers told her. She also suggested that she experienced "an immediate revelation" from God and claimed that he guided her reading of the Bible (Chandler, *American Criminal Trials* 1.20). It was obviously a scandalous claim to make.

It would have been easy to persecute Hutchinson if she was a complete outcast. She was not. She was known as a serious religious woman and a follower of none other than John Cotton, who was, after all, considered the major ideologue of American Puritanism. What is more, her views were actually rooted in basic tenets of

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the gender dimension of this scandal see Ben Barker-Benfield's "Anne Hutchinson and the Puritan Attitude toward Women" (*Feminist Studies* 1.2 [1972]: 65-92) and Amanda Portefield's "Women's Attraction to Puritanism" (*Church History* 60.2 [1991]: 196-209).

Protestantism and Puritanism. A substantial number of deeply religious colonists, both men and women, saw Hutchinson not as a dissident but as an orthodox religious visionary who was strong enough to condemn what they perceived as shortcomings of the religious order in New England. Her emphasis on the sanctity of conscience, for example, was not as scandalous as it appeared if we recall that no one other than Martin Luther used a similar argument when he claimed that his conscience prevented him from embracing what he saw as heretical doctrines of Catholicism. His words can easily be attributed to Hutchinson: “I am bound by the scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience” (20).

Another—and more important—point that made Hutchinson’s views so appealing to some colonists was her unambiguous Calvinism. We should recall that American Puritans claimed to be followers of John Calvin. One of the major tenets of his theology concerns the subject of predestination. Calvin argued that one’s salvation is possible only through the grace of God. In other words, one’s prospects for salvation were not affected by one’s deeds; people could not improve their chances for salvation by doing something good. Salvation was perceived solely as God’s act of grace which he extended to the chosen. This idea was shared by nearly all New Englanders. To argue otherwise and suggest that people can earn their salvation was considered utterly heretical. And yet, Hutchinson alleged, almost every minister in Massachusetts indirectly promoted that heretical idea by putting emphasis on the importance of what is called the Covenant of Works (the value of obedience to God) rather than the Covenant of Grace (the value of faith in God). The distinction might seem too subtle or unimportant to us today, but for New Englanders it was a matter of deep concern. They were afraid to compromise the Calvinist principles of their faith. Hutchinson’s staunch Calvinism, therefore, seemed quite attractive to many colonists, but it still put her in conflict with virtually the entire

religious establishment in New England. It is understandable that her activities nearly tore the colony apart.

We have to appreciate this controversy not only as a collision of incompatible ideas but also as a scandalous event. Anne Hutchinson was, more than anything else, a conservative provocateur. So was Winthrop, who spearheaded the efforts to prosecute and banish her. As we read their testimonies, we should recognize that they made considerable efforts to sensationalize the issues each of them considered important. Hutchinson, for her part, was quite dramatic in her denunciation of the New England clergy. Hutchinson did not see her initiatives as simple exercises in religious freedom; she actually claimed to be saving the entire Puritan experiment from various heresies. Winthrop presented his position in almost identical terms, demanding to be credited for purging the colony of the likes of Hutchinson in what he portrayed as a dramatic struggle of apocalyptic proportions.

The rhetoric of this controversy was steeped in sensationalism. The way Hutchinson and her supporters were dealt with involved not only formal actions but also scandal mongering, in which the culprits were methodically maligned to provoke the public. Winthrop's recollections of these events offer a particularly revealing example of how early American writers transformed religious scandals into imaginative and sensational stories to reassert the great potential of the Puritan experiment by emphasizing the dangers it faced. For dramatic effect, Winthrop went so far as to compare the events that unfolded in Massachusetts to the apocalyptic struggle depicted in the Book of Revelation. He dubbed Hutchinson "American Jezebel," a reference to the false female prophet and herald of doom in the Book of Revelation. According to the Bible, Jezebel's appearance and attempts to corrupt people are believed to be one of the early signs of the impending apocalypse and ultimate triumph of God's authority. Winthrop's readers were clearly expected to relate Hutchinson's trial and banishment to

the Biblical episode. In his words: “This *American Jesabel* kept her strength and reputation, even among the people of God, till the hand of Civill Justice laid hold on her, and then shee began evidently to decline, and the faithfull to bee freed from her forgeries” and “this subtilty of Satan was discovered to her utter shame and confusion” (*A Short History* 66). Hutchinson’s horrific death in Pelham Bay was also depicted in ways that recall Jezabel’s downfall. As the preface of *A Short History* reported, “Mistress Hatchison” departed to live in a place which seafarers called “Hell-gate” where she was burned alive by the Indians who, it was assumed, played a part in divine retribution. “Gods hand is the more apparently seen herein,” he wrote, “to pick out this wofull woman, to make her, and those belonging to her, an unheard of heavy example, of their cruelty above others.” Then he offered a short exultation of God, “blessed forever be his Name,” and gleefully ended the whole thing with a postscript in which he painted images of post-apocalyptic bliss, with the archfiend dead and all beasts turning meek and friendly: at least two Indian tribes, he reported, “voluntarily submitted themselves to the will and law of our God . . . and put themselves under our government and protection.” Overall, Winthrop’s pamphlet followed what would become a basic formula of Puritan sensationalism—a sequence of horrible episodes leading, invariably, to a beautiful ending.

To emphasize the negative impact of Hutchinson’s activities, Winthrop pinpointed some scandalous and shocking episodes that in his view demonstrated her pernicious influence on other women. There were, for example, two cases of women killing their children. The first one, in 1636, involved a “woman of Boston congregation [who] in much trouble of mind about her spiritual estate . . . took her little infant and threw it into a well” (*The History of New England* 1.236). Two years later, while the controversy over Hutchinson’s ideas was still raging, a woman named Dorothy Tolbye was executed for murdering her daughter (*History* 1.279). Hutchinson’s influence on

Tolby was also apparent in that Tolby suffered from “melancholy and spiritual delusions” that made her believe that she heard the voice of God. Winthrop’s records also mention another curious case—a heretical woman who maintained, among other things, that “the church is in the hands of people” and that all men and women who “profess their faith in Jesus Christ, ought to be received to the sacraments there.” What was alarming about the woman was that her ideas were potentially more dangerous than Hutchinson’s, but, Winthrop reported with some relief, “she was poor and had [too] little acquaintance” to do much harm; and so she was “adjudged to be whipped for reproaching the magistrates” and “had a cleft stick put on her tongue half an hour.” “The devil,” Winthrop histrionically lamented while recalling these cases, “would never cease to disturb our peace, and to raise up instruments one after another” (1.281-2).

The most shocking example of Hutchinson’s pernicious activities was Mary Dyer’s miscarriage of a deformed child. This occurred right at the height of the controversy in October 1637, which allowed Winthrop to attribute this dreadful case to Hutchinson’s influence. He recorded it in his pamphlet *Antinomians and Familists Condemned*, paying special attention to the monstrous appearance of the dead child:

it was stil-born, about two months before her time, the childe having life a few houres before the delivery, but so monstrous and mis-shapen, as the like hath scarce been, heard of: it had no head but a face, which stood so low upon the brest as the ears (which were like an Apes) grew upon the shoulders.

The eyes stood farre out, so did the mouth, the nose was hooking upward, the brest and back was full of sharp prickles. . . .

The arms and hands, with the thighs and legges, were as other childrens, but in stead of toes, it had upon each foot three claws, with talons like a young fowle. (43-4)

Winthrop explained the phenomenon with utmost simplicity. The miscarriage was, more than anything else, God's punishment for the parents' heresy. They were "the highest forme of our refined Familists," an antinomian group. God punished them for their crimes, which included "reproaching some of the Elders and others, who did oppose their errors." Winthrop also did not fail to observe that the midwife who delivered the "monster" was "notorious for familiarity with the devil, and now a prime Familist," which, he believed, also had a negative effect on the case (44).

What is notable about Winthrop's account is the double purpose that he made this episode serve. The miscarriage was certainly a cause for lament. As Winthrop repeatedly claimed, this occurrence went along with other dreadful events that coincided with the Antinomian controversy and pushed the colony to the brink of disintegration. And yet, Winthrop used the miscarriage to positive effect as well, because it allowed him and his associates to reaffirm the righteousness of their orthodox beliefs. Their argument for the importance of religious unity among colonists relied on horrible events like this one. In this respect, it is easy to say that Winthrop did not see these events as completely undesirable.

Overall, Winthrop's take on this case reflected the way in which many Puritan writers at the time perceived the history of their religious enterprise. They believed (or said that they believed) that the colony's future was uncertain. They warned their fellow colonists against harboring unorthodox religious factions in the colony. They cited horrible cases like Dyer's miscarriage as reminders of what could happen to the colony. The deformed stillborn, in strictly symbolic terms, was meant to be read as a warning about American history at large—its glorious prospects could be derailed if the likes of Hutchinson were allowed to spread their heretical beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For other takes on this case, see Schutte Anne Jacobson's "Such Monstrous Births': A Neglected Aspect of the Antinomian controversy" (*Renaissance Quarterly* 38.1 [1985]: 85-

The departure of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams certainly did not put an end to the religious tensions in New England. The Antinomian controversy turned out to be only a prelude to more religious disturbances in the colonies. As I briefly noted earlier in this chapter, throughout the 1640s and 1650s the magistrates in Boston had to confront a number of other people who were accused of spreading heretical views: Hugh Bewett, Jonathan Burr, Marmaduke Matthews, and William Pynchon.<sup>15</sup> By the time these dissenters were silenced, the magistrates had to turn to yet another threat—the influence of various enthusiastic sects, particularly the Ranters and Quakers. Their arrival in New England in the mid-1650s caused more upheaval—and literary output—than all the preceding scandals in American history.

The term Quakerism, which was at first considered derogatory, was given to the Religious Society of Friends, one of the most radical religious movements to emerge in England during the civil war of the 1640s. Its origins are commonly traced to the teachings of George Fox (1624-1690), a controversial religious figure whom some praised as a prophet and others decried as a quack. He was one of the most exemplary proponents of religious enthusiasm in the seventeenth century. The cornerstone of his teachings was the belief in what is called the “Inner Light,” the notion that God is present in each individual. This meant that one could grasp divine presence within oneself in stirrings of emotions and various other signs. For many people at the time, this idea seemed quite sacrilegious. The Quakers were consequently accused of antinomianism, of putting too much emphasis on their emotions, and of using their belief in the Inner Light

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106) and Bethany Reid’s “Unfit for Light’: Anne Bradstreet’s Monstrous Birth” (*New England Quarterly* 71.4 [1998]: 517-542).

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Bewett “was banished [in 1640] for holding publicly and maintaining that he was free from original sin” (Winthrop, *History* 2.22). Jonathan Burr was suspected of promoting Familism in spite of his good reputation among the elite. He was asked to dispel the colonists’ suspicions by openly denouncing such views (2.27). Marmaduke Matthews, a minister in Malden, was involved in a protracted court case regarding the “vnsound expressions in his publicke teachings.” He left New England in 1655.

to justify their eccentric and scandalous behavior. Not surprisingly, Quakerism was likened to other controversial and enthusiastic sects in England such as the Adamites and Ranters.<sup>16</sup>

Because of their radicalism and strangeness, the Quakers quickly became the target of a negative public campaign that left a trail of colorful publications detailing their alleged imbecilities. Particularly memorable were references to the Quakers' habit of appearing naked in public. The origin of this trend is not clear. The Quakers likely adopted this custom from the Ranters, who habitually disrobed themselves as a demonstration of their equality with each other in the sight of God. Disrobing also had symbolic connotations of revealing the truth, which is what Fox suggested in his writings.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of how meaningful this custom was, for the general public it was a sign of the Quakers' sexual promiscuity, which their detractors made sure to ridicule. Typical anti-enthusiastic pamphlets in the seventeenth century, such as *The Ranters Ranting* (1650), emphasized the presumed connection between the radicals' heresies and their sexual proclivities (Fig. 1.3).

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<sup>16</sup> For relevant studies of Ranters and their impact on the rise of Quakerism, see J. C. Davis's *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and David S. Lovejoy's *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

<sup>17</sup> The writings of George Fox hint at the significance of nudity among early Quakers. As he explained, Christians had to face the basic fact that religious experience lost its genuine spiritual core because people "turned from the light of Christ within" and became deceived by the clergy who made "a trade of Christ's and saints' words." Thus religion had become shrouded in lies which, at the end of times, would have to be torn down: "that cloak will not cover thee, thy skirts are seen and thy nakedness appears. The Lord made one to go naked among you, a figure of thy nakedness, and of your nakedness, as a sign amongst you, before your distraction cometh; that you might see you were naked and not covered with the truth. To the light in all your consciousness I speak, which Christ Jesus doth enlighten you withal" (90-1). For a more detailed scholarly explanation of this trend, see Kenneth L Carroll's "Early Quakers and 'Going Naked as a Sign'" (*Quaker History: The Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*. 67.2 [1978]: 69-87).



Figure 1.3: A caricature of the Ranters' alleged sexual promiscuity (1650).

Almost from the inception of Quakerism, its followers were routinely portrayed as being loose in their religious principles and sexual habits. There circulated many songs and pamphlets about the dissenters' sexual improprieties and marital infidelities. There was, for example, John Denham's cheerful song about an amusing case of bestiality: "A Relation of a Quaker that to the Shame of his Profession Attempted to Bigger a Mare near Colchester" (ca. 1653). Such works as *The Quaker's Dream* (1655), *The Quaker Wedding* (1671), and *The Secret Sinners* (1675), which Barry Levy discusses in his study *Quakers and the American Family*, exploited the common superstition that the Quakers indulged in all sorts of sex crimes, including incest, group sex, and rape.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> In addition to Barry Levy's *Quakers and the American Family: British Settlement in the Delaware Valley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), this aspect of anti-Quaker literature is analyzed in greater detail in Roger Thompson's *Unfit for Modest Ears: A Study of Pornographic, Obscene and Bawdy Works Written or Published in England in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

Charges involving Quaker marital infidelity were fairly common. It was often alleged that the Quakers had little respect for marital bonds. What was even more disturbing was that they supposedly used the Bible to justify loose family structure. Charles Leslie, in a classic of anti-Quaker literature titled *The Snake in the Grass: or, Satan Transform'd into An Angel of Light* (1698), insisted that Quaker men “condemn *Marriage* as of the *Devil*” yet enjoy the company of women as long as they are not “Ty’d to them” (76). Quaker women were perceived as being equally promiscuous. It was consequently alleged that Quaker meetings promoted lasciviousness and ultimately led to broken marriages. Leslie’s book offers many examples of the Quakers’ promiscuity while ridiculing their fundamental religious beliefs. The amusing story of James Seton is a typical example. He “parted with his *Wife*” and “fell in League with *Mary Ross*,” a Quaker, who “stript her self stark Naked” to prove her devotion to God and encouraged Seton to do the same; she assured him “it was a sign of *Guilt* to be asham’d of one Part of ones Body more than of another.” Seton’s wife, however, was boisterous enough to set her husband straight. She used her fists and nails to discourage Ross from mingling with the man (76). Cotton Mather mentions Mary Ross’s another adventure. She seduced a married couple and force them to participate in a hedonistic ritual that parodied every aspect of Christianity:

she burnt her clothes; she said that she was Christ; she gave Names to the Gang with her, as *Apostles*, calling one *Peter*, another *Thomas*; she declared that she would be *Dead* for Three Days, and then *Rise* again; and accordingly she seemed to then to *die*. *Dunen* [her companion] then gave out, that they should see Glorious things when she *Rose* again; but she then did, was thus: That upon her Order *Dunen* Sacrific’d a *Dog*. The Men and the Two Women then Danced Naked altogether. (*Magnalia Christi Americana* 26)

Examples similar to this one appeared in many other works that exploited the unfavorable image of the Quakers as heretics who prostituted the Scriptures to justify their sexual deviancy. Edmund Curll's *Post-Office Intelligence: or, Universal Gallantry* (1736), a titillating collection of contemporary love letters, includes two epistles attributed to Quakers. One of them (Letter II) is presented as a poem composed by an enamored young man; he tries to seduce a virtuous woman by using Biblical references to hide his true intentions. In Letter XXVI, a Quaker describes to his young friend the dangers and temptations that await him in London, paying particular attention to prostitution and venereal diseases. It is meant to be amusing that the author knows quite a lot about the scandalous aspects of city life and even enjoyed writing about them. Yet another work, *A Merry Conversation Which Lately Pass'd between a Very Noted Quaker, and His Maid* (1739) amuses its readers with an openly pornographic satire of the Quakers' supposed idea of religious instruction. The story begins when a young woman asks her master to explain the significance of some passages from the Bible. Imaginative as he is, he convinces her that it is better to show their meaning than to discuss it—which quickly leads to intercourse.

Long after the first controversies surrounding the Quakers died out, popular writers continued to exploit the sect's negative image. It was clear that what people actually chose to remember about the Quakers was not so much their religious views but their anarchic sentiments and alleged sexual proclivities. Take, for example, James Grahame's *History of . . . the United States* (1827). Its author invested his discussion of seventeenth-century Quakerism with provocatively Bacchanalian overtones:

female [Quaker] preachers far exceeded their male associates in folly, frenzy, and indecency. One of them presented herself to a congregation, with her face begrimed with coal dust, announcing it as an emblem of *the black pox*, which the heaven had commissioned on all carnal worshippers.

Some of them, in rueful attire, perambulated the streets, proclaiming the immediate coming of an angel with a drawn sword, to plead with the people; and some attempted feats that may seem to verify the legend of Godiva of Coventry. One woman, in particular, entered stark naked into a church in the middle of divine service, and desired the people to take heed to her as a sign of the times . . . . The horror that these insane enormities were fitted to inspire, was inflamed into the most violent indignation.

(356)

Similar details can be found in another nineteenth-century book, James Silk Buckingham's *America, Historical, Statistical, and Descriptive* (1841). It includes only a short section about the Quakers; what is telling is that it is devoted almost entirely to their imbecilities. Another popular writer of the day hoped to exploit the public's perception of Quakerism as a lascivious sect by adorning his novel with the enticing title *Wild Oats; or, Amours of a Quaker* (1848).

The notion that the Quakers were implicated in witchcraft was as old as their movement. *An Answer to a Scandalous Paper* (1656), a relatively early pamphlet on the subject, mentions an episode in which a woman, ignoring her husband's warnings, went to a Quaker meeting and was bewitched. She could only be saved after her husband stripped her clothes off and, following a thorough examination, uncovered and removed "a silk thread" that apparently had something to do with her bewitched state (a7-b1). Increase Mather's book of wonders titled *Illustrious Providences* (1684) and Charles Leslie's *The Snake in the Grass* are also good examples of the extent to which anti-Quaker and witchcraft narratives became mutually dependent in terms of style, strategy, and use of imagery. Leslie's book contains a descriptive chapter titled "Of the Visible Possessions of Many Quakers by the Devil," in which the author explicitly conflates Quakerism with witchcraft by referring to what he describes as "*Quaker-Witches*" (286,

304). Colonists' prejudices against Quakers are also well recorded in Elizabeth Ashbridge's early eighteenth-century narrative, *Some Account of the Early Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge* (1807), in which she recalled the hostility she encountered when she became a Quaker. Her husband, who was convinced that his wife was "bewitched," was bewildered: "I had rather have heard she was dead . . ." (32).

Magistrates in New England were convinced that the dangers of Quakerism extended to civil matters as well. The Quakers' behavior was portrayed as not only immoral but also dangerous to the existing social order. There were several things that reinforced this notion. First, the Quakers' radical insistence on human equality was assumed to promote disrespect for the political order. Second, some magistrates and ministers were concerned about the Quaker habit of itinerant preaching—something which, as we will see later in this chapter, would become a major concern during religious revivals. Itinerancy was considered detrimental to the colonies because it was believed to undermine the authority of the existing churches. Finally, the Quaker loose concept of family (or the way the concept was interpreted by non-Quakers) and their alleged tolerance for marital infidelity gave the impression that they had no respect for the institution of marriage and, ultimately, political order at large. Judging by the 1658 statement issued by the General Court in Massachusetts, it was clear that the authorities feared that the Quakers would influence people of lower classes who were believed to be "less affected to the order & government in church and comonwealth." Quakers were also suspected of "stirring vp mutiny, sedition, or rebelljon against the government" and "denying civil respect & reuerence to aequalls & superiors" (Hallowell 139-40). Considering the colonies' volatility, the Quaker presence was simply deemed troublesome, particularly during wars with the Indians. Cotton Mather expressed his dismay about Quakers' subversive activities during one of the wars:

If the *Indians* have chosen to prey upon the *Frontiers* and *Out-Skirts* of the Province, the *Quakers* have chosen the very same *Frontiers*, and *Out-Skirts* for their more *Spiritual Assaults* . . . they have been Labouring *incessantly* , and sometimes not *unsuccessfully*, to Enchant and Poison the *Souls* of poor People, in the very Places where the *Bodies* and *Estates* of the People have been presently after been devoured by the Savages.

He singled out Thomas Maule, an ardent Quaker activist who criticized the way the war against Indians was conducted, as a prime example of the Quakers' perniciousness. Mather claimed that Maule threatened the safety of the colony because he "Defend[ed] the *Indians* in their Bloody Villanies, and Revile[d] the Country for defending it self against them" (*Magnalia Christi Americana* 96).

The persecution of the Quakers in New England was inevitable. Even before they started to arrive in the colonies in the mid-1650s, colonists were already aware of Quakerism through anti-Quaker literature which was imported from England. It is understandable that by the time the first Quakers appeared in Massachusetts colonists had already made up their minds about Quakerism as a dangerous heresy. Mary Fisher and Ann Austin, two young Quakers who came to Boston in 1656, were not even allowed to get off the ship before they were thoroughly searched. Their books were seized and burned. The women were stripped naked to be examined for signs of witchcraft. Then they spent five weeks in jail where they awaited a ship which would take them back to Barbados, their last point of departure.

The General Court in Massachusetts reacted to the threat of Quakerism by passing several laws. The first one, issued in October of 1656, threatened captains of ships that brought any Quaker to New England with hefty fines and stipulated punishments for the Quakers who dared to show up in Massachusetts. The law also prohibited importation and publication of Quaker literature and outlawed any form of



Figure 1.4  
Mary Dyer is led to her execution in Boston.

support for their heretical doctrines. A year later the Court adopted yet another law that provided even more severe punishments for the Quakers; henceforth they were to have their ears cut off and deported. In 1658, the law was modified to require execution of those Quakers who returned to the commonwealth after being deported.

But this did not dissuade some Quakers from travelling to New England, even under the threat of certain death. The story of Mary Dyer, the same woman who was implicated in the Antinomian controversy in the 1630s, is a sad example. She became a Quaker while visiting England in the early 1650s. When she returned to Boston in 1657, she was immediately detained and expelled from the colony. Defying the terms of her banishment, she returned two years later in order to visit two fellow Quakers, Marmaduke Stephenson and William Robinson, who were awaiting execution. For this transgression, she received a death sentence and was to be executed along with the other two Quakers—but at the last moment, with a noose on her neck, she was reprieved. She was forced to watch Stephenson’s and Robinson’s executions and then was banished again. She was told, in no uncertain terms, that were she to return to Boston she would certainly be executed. Dyer did not obey. She was convinced that she had to follow a

divine calling to proselytize and defend her faith. After she returned to Boston, she was hanged on June 1, 1660. Another martyr, William Leddra, was executed in March of the following year. It was clear that the authorities were not inclined to tolerate Quakerism at any cost, even when they suspected that they did not have enough authority to hang the Quakers.

Other English colonies in North America adopted numerous laws to prevent the Quakers from gaining a foothold in the New World. Even after commonwealth magistrates were forced by Charles II to stop executions of Quakers, the death penalty in such cases was replaced with other elaborate punishments. The General Court's 1661 law obliged colonists to follow a simple procedure when dealing with alleged Quakers: the suspect was subjected to a thorough interrogation and, if deemed to be a Quaker, stripped from the waist up, tied to a cart, and whipped from town to town (Hallowell 142). The elaborateness of such punishments gives a clear indication that the authorities wanted to turn these chastisements into provocative and educational spectacles to be observed by as many people as possible. The rituals' sensationalist appeal was undeniable.<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary accounts of provocative events—be they outbreaks of various heresies, cases of witchcraft, or hostilities with the Indians—offer great insights into the ways in which early American writers transformed the complex reality of frontier life into the simplicity of religious literature by expunging anything from their accounts that could not be made to evoke some religious meaning. They turned such events into sermons, cautionary tales, and other publications that could simultaneously intimidate

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<sup>19</sup> The following works offer more detailed studies of Quaker trials in America: Carla Gardina Pestana's "The City upon a Hill under Siege: The Puritan Perception of the Quaker Threat to Massachusetts Bay, 1656-1661" (*The New England Quarterly* 56.3 [1983]: 323-353), Richard P. Hallowell's *The Quaker Invasion of Massachusetts* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1884), David S. Lovejoy's *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), and James Emmett Ryan's *Imaginary Friends: Representing Quakers in American Culture, 1650-1950* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

readers with shocking details and create a sense of desirable resolution by underscoring the great potential of the Puritan experiment. While reading such works, one often gets the impression that they were not reluctant reactions to various crimes and misdemeanors. American writers actually relied on such scandalous cases to promote their religious views. Had there been no scandals, they would have had to be invented to serve this purpose. America's blissful future, which the Puritans imagined in their sermons, grew directly from the graves of defeated criminals, savages, and heretics.

## CHAPTER II

### FROM RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENTS TO REVOLUTIONARY RHETORIC

“I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish Church, by the Protestant Church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.”

Thomas Paine  
*The Age of Reason*, 1794

**Précis:** The climate of contentiousness in the seventeenth-century New England contributed to codification of provocative rhetoric. Proponents of this trend, who included prominent American writers, politicians, and religious figures, relied on sensationalist techniques to promote the ideas which, they believed, represented core American values. This trend was particularly apparent in the late seventeenth century, when New England went through a period of drastic political restructuring, during the religious revivals in the 1730s and 1740s, and in the outbreak of revolutionary fever in the 1760s and 1770s. These events, which reflected the increasingly contentious character of American culture, helped establish the didactic tradition of sensationalism as a uniquely American rhetorical form.

## JEREMIADS AND THE GREAT AWAKENING

There was no shortage of disturbing events and upheavals in New England after 1660. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the New England colonies went through so many cataclysms—wars, political turmoil, encroachment of Anglicanism, and natural disasters—that many settlers started to doubt the colonies' prospects. Indeed, colonists at that time had many reasons to conclude that their religious agenda was effectively derailed. New England was clearly not a blissful religious sanctuary blessed by God. It was an arena for wars and political tensions that were taking the colonists further and further from what the vision created by the founders. It is understandable that toward the end of the seventeenth century, American Puritan literature acquired a distinctly alarmist tone. It was permeated with what can be described as an odd mixture of sad lamentation and optimistic calls for a religious revival.

The New Englanders had many reasons to be agitated. The first generation of colonists—the greats such as Winthrop, Bradford, and Cotton—were dead. The signs of trouble were numerous: smallpox epidemics, earthquakes, devastating fires, and droughts. Following a sighting of the 1664 comet, which was seen as a portent of something dreadful, Samuel Danforth compiled a list of recent disasters in New England and concluded that they were signs of God's displeasure with colonists. The common refrain in Puritan sermons of that period was that things were not going the way they were intended.

Considering this gloomy state of affairs, it was an easy point to make. In political and religious terms, New England's future was far from being certain. In just three decades, the region went through three major wars. King Philip's War against the Indians (1675-6) was a crude reminder of how unstable the colonial society was. In the following decades, New England was also dragged into two wars that originated in

Europe—King William’s War (1690-7) and Queen Anne’s War (1702-13)—which added to the colonists’ sense of unease.

Meanwhile, changes in the political and religious climate in England offered colonists even more reasons to be alarmed. Cromwell’s Protectorate, whose favors New Englanders enjoyed, collapsed soon after his death in 1658. The new king, Charles II, had an outstanding reputation for immoral behavior. While in exile, he spent a decade in France. His wife was a Catholic. What is more, no one could figure out his religious views. The real danger to Puritanism, however, came not from Charles, who actually advocated religious tolerance, but the new Parliament. It was dominated by Anglicans who were dead set on pushing religious dissenters, particularly the Puritans, into the oblivion. Between 1661 and 1665, the Parliament adopted four major laws, commonly referred to as the Clarendon Code, to promote Anglicanism and suppress religious dissent. The Corporation Act (1661) restricted political offices in England to members of the Church of England. The Act of Uniformity (1662) required the use of Anglican rites in public ceremonies. The Conventicle Act (1664) simply forbade assemblies of more than five non-Anglican people. Finally, the Oxford Act (the Five-Mile Act, 1665) barred nonconformist ministers from residing within five miles of any parish that sent representatives to Parliament. Although these laws did not directly affect New England, colonists were right to think that the wave of anti-Puritanism would soon reach the American shores as well.

England’s economic policy in New England was even more troublesome. In 1651 Cromwell introduced a series of laws, the Navigation Acts, which restricted American trade with England by forcing colonists to rely solely on English carriers. In 1660, the Navigation Acts were expanded and forced New England into an even more unfavorable position, prompting some entrepreneurial individuals to turn to smuggling. But smuggling could only solve some of colonists’ financial woes. In political terms, the

Navigation Acts made New Englanders' painfully aware of how fragile their autonomy was.

Indeed, in 1684 the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which gave colonists considerable liberty in governing themselves, was simply revoked and all English colonies from New Jersey to Maine, whose residents had little in common, were united into the Dominion of New England—and its chief officer was appointed directly by the king rather than elected by colonists. What made these developments even more shocking in the eyes of the American Puritans was that Edmund Andros, the Dominion's governor, was vehemently Anglican and quite disrespectful of the Puritans' political and religious culture. Imagine their dismay. Many Puritans left England to escape what they saw as the corruption of Anglicanism. While in America, they strove to create a model political order which could be emulated in England. Instead, their enterprise was trampled, and they found themselves governed by the king's Anglican appointee. Soon after the arrival of Andros, colonists' dismay grew into utter shock when Charles II, on his death bed, converted to Catholicism and (more bad news) was succeeded by his openly Catholic brother, James II. Even after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, when the English throne was returned to a Protestant king and the American colonists overthrew Andros's government in Boston, Massachusetts continued to be dominated by the crown. Connecticut regained considerable political freedom, because it was granted a charter, but its leaders still had to work around political pressures from England.

The alarmist overtones which are so apparent in late seventeenth-century American literature reflected these events. The last decades of the seventeenth century can be characterized as a period of *jeremiads*—provocative sermons that emphasize the colonists' sense of despair about their affairs. Such sermons rely on sensationalist techniques and highlight various problems by exposing (or making up) the most unsavory and shocking crimes as evidence of a social and religious downfall. Depressing

as they were, however, jeremiads were actually meant to have a positive impact by shocking audiences in order to revive their religious zeal. This rhetorical approach is clearly contradictory because jeremiads explicitly rejected the very same ideas they implicitly promoted; jeremiads were meant to inspire people to persevere in their work by blaming them for their faults and emphasizing the hopelessness of their endeavors.

Some notable examples of this genre include Samuel Danforth's *A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness* (1671), Increase Mather's *Day of Trouble is Near* (1674), William Adams's *The Necessity of Pouring out of the Spirit from on High upon a Sinning Apostatizing People* (1679), and Samuel Torrey's *A Plea for the Life of Dying Religion* (1683). These sermons were notable for their use of provocative imagery of sickness, violence, and decay to describe the colony's sad state of spiritual affairs. Danforth's sermon is an indisputable classic of the genre. Overall, he went out of his way to emphasize the great promise of the colonists' "errand into the wilderness," hoping to boost the colonists' morale. Danforth drew a parallel between the Puritan effort to create a perfect Christian society and John the Baptist's preparation of the path for Christ. At the same time, he mercilessly condemned the colonists' numerous inequities: a lack of faith that bordered on outright atheism, growing sensuality, and obsession with luxury. The sermon's provocative tone was meant to "excite and stir" colonists to return to the ideals of their ancestors and embrace the religious principles upon which the commonwealth was founded (18).

The sense of urgency which the colonists felt even prompted several religious leaders to request that the Massachusetts General Court in 1679 call a synod to find a solution to what they saw as a crisis of the colony's religious identity. It addressed two main questions: "What are the Evils that have provoked the Lord to bring his Judgments on New-England?" and "What is to be done that, so those Evils may be Reformed?" (Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* 5.88, 5.91). The synod purposefully

offered a rather morbid assessment of the situation in Massachusetts, charging the colonists with a long list of transgressions, such as growing disrespect for religion, swearing, profanity, sexual impropriety, intemperance, and other crimes. It was a startling admission that the colony had essentially failed to achieve the goals envisioned by the founders. The synod's contentious rhetoric was off-putting but arguably effective. On the one hand, the synod's report was a startling admission that the colony had essentially failed to achieve the goals envisioned by the founders. It provoked the colonists to rethink their attitude toward religion.

A reliance on scandalous imagery in calls for religious revival, which never really died out in America, became one of the most recognizable characteristics of the American rhetorical tradition. We can discern this strategy in many other works from the 1670s as well as in later periods. Indeed, several years after the publication of the synod's report, the General Court adopted the same tone and even cribbed specific details from the report when it proclaimed that "this poor Land has laboured under a long *Series* of afflictions and Calamities" which were caused by "a corruption of this Colony against Vice, and all sorts of *Debauchery* and *Prophaneness*," including "*Blasphemy, Cursing, Prophane Swearing, Lying, Unlawful Gaming, Sabbath breaking, Idleness, Drunkenness, Uncleaness, and all the Enticements and Nurseries of such Impieties*" (Cotton Mather, *Present State of New-England* 48-9).

The proliferation of this trend shows that many American writers implicitly endorsed the strategy of emotional manipulation to convey important religious and political ideas. As we will see in the subsequent chapters, this approach made an impact on early American literature. What has to be pointed out, however, is that the sensationalist character of such rhetoric was not really acknowledged. For the most part, writers exploited scandalous details without addressing the question of whether such strategy was efficient or legitimate—after all, appeals to the senses can be effective but

also potentially dangerous. It was not until the revivals that began in the early 1730s that this question finally provoked an intense debate about the legitimacy of sensationalist techniques.

#### THE LITERARY WARFARE OF THE GREAT AWAKENING

The religious revivals of the 1730s and early 1740s, which became known as the Great Awakening, made a substantial impact on American literature, precisely because they brought the subject of sensationalism to the surface. The period saw an unprecedented rise of religious activities whose proponents sought new ways to rekindle Americans' religiosity. Their intentions were for the most part noble and relied on the techniques developed by their Puritan predecessors. Many revivalists used exceptionally provocative imagery in their sermons to manipulate the public's emotions to inspire people to become more serious about religion. And yet, the "new lights," as revivalists were known, were almost from the start embroiled in one controversy after another. They were accused of relying on unconventional and even scandalous methods—and even of destroying religious foundations of the country. Such accusations may seem odd. Why were they ostracized, if they relied on the methods of their predecessors? The reason was that the impact of the revivals was not limited to religion. It also forced Americans to confront the sensationalist character of their culture.

The first signs of these developments could be felt in the Connecticut valley sometime in the late 1720s. The area was known for its religious radicalism for a long time. It was there, in Northampton to be exact, where Jonathan Edwards, one of the leading figures of the Great Awakening, started his controversial campaign to reverse religious backsliding in his congregation with fiery sermons that earned both fame and notoriety. He was not alone. In 1738, revival efforts in the colonies received a substantial

boost with the arrival of George Whitefield, an immensely popular itinerant preacher from England. His grand preaching tour through America lasted for two years (1739-40), during which he gathered massive and diverse crowds, sometimes as many as 30 000 people, who were drawn to his unusual sermons. Those who attended his public appearances were often amazed by what Olaudah Equiano, who saw Whitefield preach in Philadelphia, described as the minister's "fervour and earnestness." He added that he "had never seen divines exert themselves in this manner" (132). But what was even more noteworthy, as Benjamin Franklin recalled after attending Whitefield's sermon, was his ability to appeal to people of different religious views: "The Multitudes of all Sects and Denominations that attended his Sermons were enormous . . ." (*Autobiography* 87).

In addition to Edwards and Whitefield, there were many other clergymen and women who experimented with new forms of preaching, which could not help but spark a contentious debate about their methods. The revivalists' main argument was neither unique nor new. They were convinced that Americans' religious zeal was fading and therefore needed to be revived—but their initiatives were quite controversial. In basic terms, they argued that sermons had to be felt in order to be understood. As we saw in the introduction, this idea was actually quite acceptable among many Puritan theologians, but what set the revivalists apart from their predecessors was that they went out of their way to emphasize the importance of emotion and sensationalism in religion. The problem with conventional preaching, as Edwards saw it, was that religious ideas could easily lose their immediate meaning in abstract discussions of faith. He stressed the point that words and ideas in themselves are meaningless unless they are connected with what they represent. As he explained, "a great part of our thoughts . . . is without the actual ideas of those things of which we discourse," which led him to conclude that more often than not "the mind makes use of signs instead of the ideas themselves" (Miller, "Jonathan Edwards on the Sense of the Heart" 129). He added: "Very commonly

we discourse about them [spiritual things] in our minds, and argue, and reason concerning them, without any idea at all of the things themselves to any degree, but only to make use of the signs instead of the ideas” (132). Edwards’s conclusion was that ideas needed to be sensed, even if that meant that the public had to be shocked in order to feel the ideas. George Whitefield shared this approach in that he was convinced that religious experience had to incorporate some “inward feeling,” without which one had “only a name to live.” He argued that “It is impossible to worship God in a set form of prayer” and praised those who put “their words in prayer [of] the language of their hearts, [so that] they were no strangers to inward feelings” (“The Wise and Foolish Virgins” 304-5).

The Western world was in fact engulfed in outbreaks of new religious thinking of this sort. Pietism, a Lutheran movement, was in the rise in Europe. It appealed to common people with the idea that a genuine religious experience can be achieved through individual piety rather than rigorous studying of the scriptures. John Wesley, John Whitefield’s fellow revivalist, was greatly influenced by that idea. Eastern Europe saw the appearance of Hasidism, a popular form of Judaism that rejected rigorous scholasticism in the name of simple and joyous appreciation of faith. The Hasidic movement was populist and essentially anti-elitist. The Catholic world was also vibrant with new forms of religious populism.<sup>20</sup> Those who were not fond of revivalism had reasons to be alarmed.

Considering New Englanders’ traditional hostility toward antinomianism and radical Quakerism, it is not surprising that the revivalists’ emphasis on “sensations” and “inward feelings” essentially left their efforts open to accusations of enthusiasm. The full-

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<sup>20</sup> Among other studies, see Glenn Dynner’s *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Marc R. Forster’s, *Catholic Revival in the Age of the Baroque: Religious Identity in Southwest Germany, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).



Figures 2.1 & 2.2: Two eighteenth-century cartoons of George Whitefield.

blown controversy that followed quickly divided colonial ministers in their attitudes toward the question of whether sensationalism was appropriate in religion.

Opponents of the revivals, who became known as “old lights,” were quick to point out—or make up—examples of the new trend’s negative impact. One detractor succinctly summed up the situation by saying that revivalists were guilty of “Enthusiasm, Pride, Error and Nonsense” (*Letter from . . . Boston* 86). Their preaching style was described as mere emotional manipulation. One witness of Jonathan Edwards’s religious service recalled the stupor it caused in the audience: “before the sermon was done—there was a great moaning & crying out through ye whole House—What Shall I do to be Sav[ed]—oh I am going to Hell—Of what shall I do for Christ, &c. &c.” (Zakai 287). Here are some other typical accounts of audience reactions to revivalist sermons: “Multitudes, whose *sensible Perceptions* arose to such a Height . . . *cried out, fell down, swooned away, and, to All Appearance, were like Persons in Fits*” (*A Letter from . . . Boston* 12). “You may hear screaming, singing, laughing, praying, all at once,” wrote another American reporter to his correspondent in Europe: “they fall into Visions, Trances, Convulsions. When they come out of their Trances, they commonly tell a senseless Story of Heaven and Hell, and whom and what they saw there” (*The State of Religion* 7). Meanwhile some attendees, visibly deranged, went about asking each other, “How do you feel? Have you seen Christ?” (7-8). Charles Chauncy, an ardent anti-revivalist, emphasized that one of the problems with “new lights” was that they put too much emphasis on emotion at the expense of reason. He described a typical revivalist meeting as nothing more than “a mere *sensitive Commotion*.” People who attended such gatherings were affected “not by a rational Conviction of Truth, but a sudden and strong Impression on the *animal Oeconomy*” (*Seasonal Thoughts* 80).

Revivalist ministers were blamed directly for relying on sensationalist techniques: “Their main design in preaching, seems not so much to inform Men’s

Judgments, as to *terrify* and *affright* their Imagination; by *awful Words* and *frightful Representations*, to set the Congregation into hideous Shrieks and Out-cries” (Chauncy, *Seasonable Thoughts* 96). Another witness wrote that a revivalist preacher’s goal was “either to puzzle or to frighten his Hearers, but especially the last, which he did by roaring out and bellowing, *Hell, Damnation, Devils*, and all the *dreadful Words* he could think of . . . . He seemed to have a particular Quarrel with Reason, Learning and Morality” (*State of Religion* 3). While sermonizing, he “beats the Pulpit with his Fists, knocks upon it with his Knees, and Stamps with his Feet, and screams and hollows, so that the Audience cannot distinctly hear one Sentence; and yet Scores, nay, Hundreds of them, have fallen down at once, and lyen sprawling upon the Floor” (9).

What critics of the revivals found particularly disturbing was that the leading revivalists’ fame inspired a number of frauds and imitators who traveled throughout the colonies and delivered sermons similar to those of Edwards and Whitefield. Those “*Young Quacks in Divinity*,” as some “new lights” were dubbed, were accused of indulging their vanity by diligently cultivating their public image and seeking to become celebrities with recognizable names. “There never was a Time,” Chauncy sarcastically remarked, “wherein there was such flocking after *some particular Ministers*, and *glorying* in them, as though they were Gods rather than *Men*” (*Seasonable Thoughts* 2). Another commentator wrote of these frauds: “They are like *Vain Persons* who think themselves *Handsome*, apt to define *Others*, Looking upon *Themselves* as exquisite *Pictures of Holiness*” (Land 4-6). Whitefield in particular was “received as though he had been an *angel of God* . . . strangely flocked after by all Sorts of Persons, and much admired by the *Vulgar*, both *great* and *small*” (*Letter from Boston* 6). Such details about some revivalists’ fame were important because it was often argued that their popularity rested entirely on their ability to market themselves rather than the validity of their teachings. Indeed, it is hard to deny that revivalist audiences, particularly in large cities

where newspapers inadvertently promoted revivals by treating them as objects of curiosity, seemed to have cared much less about spiritual matters than a chance to see religious celebrities.<sup>21</sup>

Some contemporary caricatures portrayed revivalist ministers as vain celebrities, hypocrites, and even criminals. “Enthusiasm Display’d” (ca. 1739), for example, depicts a group of misguided young women who carry Whitefield, an attractive young man, on their shoulders (Fig. 2.1). Another contemporary cartoon, “Dr. Squintum’s Exaltation or the Reformation” (1763), satirizes George Whitefield’s journey through the American colonies as an endless crime spree (Fig. 2.2). To suggest his satanic character, Whitefield is depicted preaching while a demon is pouring poison into his ear. Meanwhile, his accomplices rob and seduce parishioners. One man (on the left) is making inappropriate advances toward a hesitant young woman, while another man (under the demon with trumpets) is clutching a boy whom he is trying to kiss. William Hogarth’s “Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism” (1762) is a particularly colorful satire of what was perceived as revivalists’ imbecility (Fig. 2.3). It depicts a preacher terrifying the congregation with the puppets of a devil and a witch. Various inscriptions around the room read “madness,” “lust,” and “agony,” and instruct the congregation to “continually do cry.” In the meantime, not far from him, another preacher is trying to seduce a young woman by inserting a religious tract into her cleavage. One woman in the audience is giving birth to a litter of rabbits, while a visibly intoxicated man is vomiting right next to her.

The eccentricities of some radical revivalists only reconfirmed their iconoclastic image. James Davenport, a Connecticut preacher, left his congregation and hit the road

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<sup>21</sup> As Lisa Herb Smith argues in “The First Great Awakening in American Newspapers, 1739-48” (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Delaware, 1998), newspaper accounts of the revivals, many of which were clearly sensationalist in their nature, played a crucial role in fueling the controversy. This argument is also explored in Frank Lambert’s *Inventing the “Great Awakening”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), which points out the essential role of national and international coverage in sustaining the revivals.



Figure 2.3: William Hogarth's "Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism" (1762).

with a repertoire of provocative sermons which he delivered in ways that made many doubt his sanity. His performance was unpredictable, erratic, and afflicted by what was described as "sudden impulses." His eccentricities and adventures eventually inspired an entire subgenre of anti-revivalist literature and as well as intensive journalistic coverage.

Charles Chauncy, who collected many reports of Davenport's imbecilities in *Seasonable Thoughts*, wrote that during one sermon Davenport "came out of the Pulpit, and stripped off his upper Garments, and got up into the Seats, and leapt up and down sometime, and clapt his Hands, and *cried out* . . . the Devil goes down, the Devil goes down" (99). It was also reported that Davenport disparaged traditional ministers by calling them "*Enemies of God*" and encouraged their parishioners to leave their congregations. He attacked idolatry and luxury, proclaiming on one occasion that "Wigs, Cloaks and Breeches, Hoods, Gowns, Rings, Jewels and Necklaces must be brought together into one Heap [to] be committed to the Flames" (221). Other rumors about him seemed to confirm his insanity. On one occasion he walked fifty miles in snow to deliver a sermon. One sermon lasted nearly twenty four hours. In 1742 he briefly had to suspend his activities when he was arrested and declared insane. After he was released, he continued his work with a zeal and strangeness that would probably put the surrealists to shame. In 1743 in New London, Davenport publicly set ablaze a pile of books in a bonfire.

A year later, as if affirming his unpredictability, Davenport published a pamphlet—*The Reverend Mr. James Davenport's Confession & Retractions*—in which he completely reversed his stance, condemned his "unjust apprehensions and misconduct," and expressed his gratitude to his former persecutors for their efforts to curb the spread of revivalism. He acknowledged that his past efforts encouraged dissent and disrespect for ministers. He also admitted that his encouragement of "private persons" to claim their right to preach was utterly detrimental to the state of religion. Finally, he expressed regret for what he claimed as the chief reason for his criminal behavior in the past—the practice of following his "Impulses and Impressions as a Rule of Conduct"—something which he could only overcome after "mature Consideration" (5, 3). He wrote that he had reached "a sweet Calm and Serenity of Soul and Rest in God" (8), thus endorsing the arguments of his former enemies who condemned the revivalists'

reliance on distracting, sensationalist techniques. Solomon Williams, an ardent anti-revivalist, welcomed Davenport back to religious normalcy and adorned his confessionary pamphlet with an introduction that praised the prodigal son for his “*humble, and Christian-like Temper*” (2).<sup>22</sup>

Other revivalists were even more capricious in their allegiance to the revivalist cause than Davenport was. Andrew Croswell, a Davenport devotee, looked on in dismay as less passionate revivalists lost their zeal and fell out of the picture. Croswell, for his part, remained undeterred and strongly passionate about his revivalist efforts. His detractors found them both amusing and terrifying. Croswell had little regard for social distinctions and conducted religious services that gathered notably mixed audiences of men, women, non-white people, and children. What is more, his conduct betrayed complete disrespect for traditional methods of worship. He did not believe, for example, that the pulpit should be the center of a ceremony. While preaching, he constantly moved around to stir the audiences’ emotions. While critics saw Croswell as an utter anarchist, he believed that he was a true heir to the spirit of the Reformation. His long

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<sup>22</sup> Solomon Williams published at least two pamphlets about Davenport: *The Reverend Mr. James Davenport’s Confession & Retractions* (1744) and *Two Letters from the Reverend Mr. Williams & Wheelock of Lebanon, to the Rev. Mr. Davenport* (1744). One can get a good idea of Davenport’s notoriety by looking at Charles Chauncy’s lengthy and unsympathetic accounts about Davenport collected in the “Things of a Bad and Dangerous Tendency” chapter of Chauncy’s *Seasonable Thoughts* (see pages 151-217 in particular). Davenport also received much attention from Joseph Tracy, one of the first historians to write about these events, in *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (1842). More recent studies of Davenport include Harry S. Stout’s and Peter Onuf’s “James Davenport and the Great Awakening in New London” (*The Journal of American History*, 70.3 [1983]: 556-78), Robert William Brockway’s concise but informative dissertation titled “The Significance of James Davenport in Great Awakening” (Ph.D. Thesis, Columbia University, 1951), portions of J. Richard Olivas’s “Great Awakenings: Time, Space, and the Varieties of Religious Revivalism in Massachusetts and Northern New England, 1740-1748” (Ph.D. Thesis, UCLA, 1997), and Lisa Herb Smith’s “The First Great Awakening in American Newspapers, 1739-1748 (George Whitefield, James Davenport, Gilbert Tennent)” (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Delaware, 1999).

career of religious dissent stretched for decades and left a splendid trail of acrimonious pamphlets.<sup>23</sup>

The democratic and egalitarian spirit of the revivals (which was more discernable in the revivals' impact rather than their intent) was obviously a cause for alarm. Chauncy bitterly complained that "*Common People . . . all over the Land*" and "*Men of all Occupations*" started to "mistake the Motions of their *own* Minds for *divine Suggestions*," developed disdain for the "*Written Word*" and "*studied Sermons*," and ultimately stopped recognizing the distinction between "*learned and unlearned*." Among the revivalists, he exclaimed in horror, were not only "*young Persons*" ("*Babes in Age*") but also "*Women and Girls*," even "*Negroes*" and "*Indians*" who took "upon them to do the Business of *Preachers*" (*Seasonable Thoughts* 200, 216, 226). Davenport's entourage was a good example of this trend: he was often accompanied by "*Lay-Men . . . of no Education*" and "*small Capacity*" (199).

It is noteworthy that some passages in anti-revivalist literature read like parodies of the nascent democratic sentiment (after 1776, the anti-revivalists' arguments were actually routinely adopted in anti-revolutionary and anti-republican propaganda). *Seasonable Thoughts* includes an amusing story that ridicules the egalitarian spirit of the revivals—a group of children in one town was so swayed by Davenport that they decided to create a church of their own. They "held a *private Meeting* among themselves" and "*prayed very earnestly*" while "using the Phrases [Davenport] was so very fond of" (193-4). There was something anarchical about revivalist gatherings: "They often begin with a single Person, a *Child*, or *Woman*, or *Lad*, whose *Shrieks* set others a *Shrieking*; and so the *Shrieks* catch from one to another" (106). Similar to later parodies of American

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<sup>23</sup> Croswell's numerous imbecilities are discussed in the "Satan Begins to Rage" chapter of Henry Bamford Parkes's *Jonathan Edwards*. Leigh Eric Schmidt offered an extensive analysis of Croswell's religious views and their sensationalist character in "A Second and Glorious Reformation': The New Light Extremism of Andrew Croswell" (*The William and Mary Quarterly*, 43.2 [1986]: 214-44).

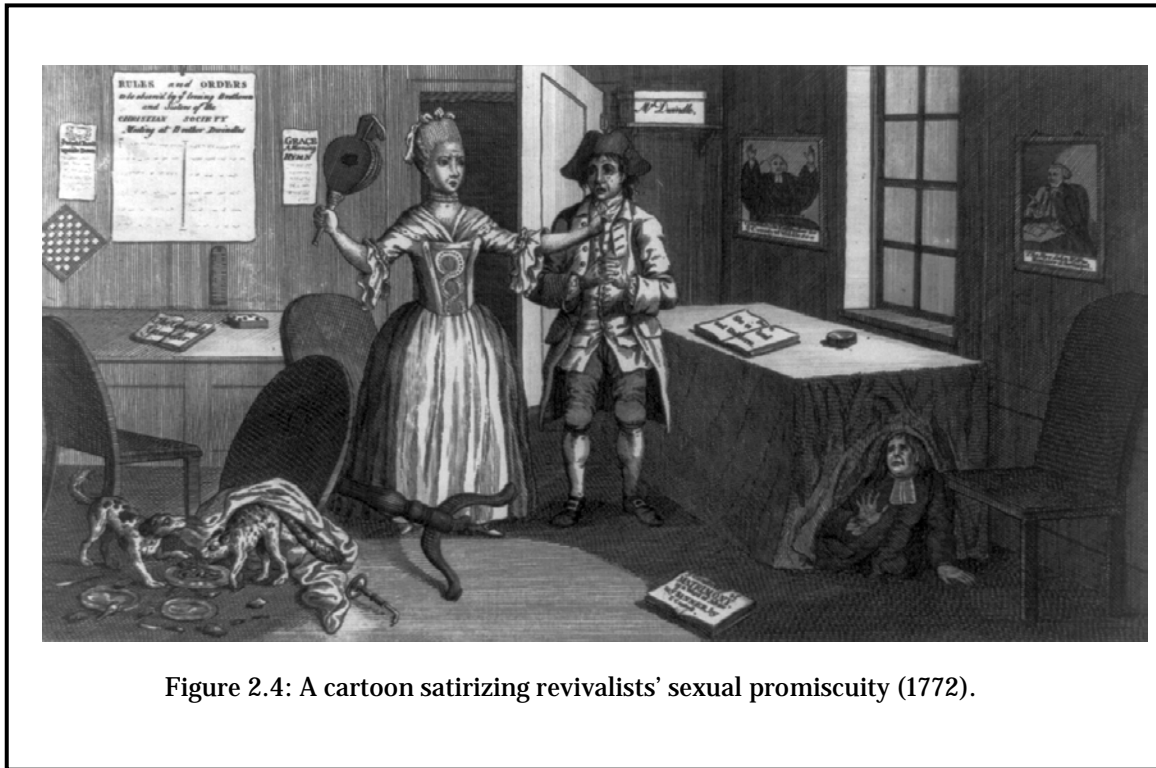


Figure 2.4: A cartoon satirizing revivalists' sexual promiscuity (1772).

democracy, revivals were portrayed as chaotic gatherings in which the prospect of equality was just a mirage. Revivals merely allowed conniving manipulators to exploit the public.

Women who were caught in the frenzy of revivals were routinely portrayed as both culprits and victims. It helps to recall that the majority of churchgoers in New England were women. It was therefore easy to portray them as victims of itinerant preachers who kept infiltrating various congregations.<sup>24</sup> The cartoon titled “A Methodist, Love Feast” (1772) exemplifies the public’s mistrust of revivalists and their image of seducers (Fig. 2.4). It depicts a hapless husband who returns home to find his wife in the middle of what he believes to be a religious lesson. Meanwhile, her study partner, a Methodist preacher, is hiding under the table, which suggests some sexual impropriety on his part. The portrait of George Whitefield, mounted on the wall, suggests that this

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the gender composition of the New England congregation, see Cedric B. Cowing’s “Sex and Preaching in the Great Awakening” (*American Quarterly* 20.2 [1968]: 624-44).

cartoon is meant to ridicule not only Methodism but revivalism in general. Thomas Rowlandson's pornographic cartoon "The Sanctified Sinner" also reminds us of the revivalists' reputation of licentious rakes (Fig. 4.3). It depicts a young woman masturbating a praying minister in a room decorated with Whitefield's portrait.

Charles Chauncy went even further in his denunciation of itinerant preachers. Expertly exploiting Biblical references, he suggested that the revivals foreshadowed the end of the world. He quoted "The Second Epistle to Timothy" in which he compared some male revivalists to "*evil Men and Seducers*" who, "*laden with sins*" and "*divers lusts,*" "*creep into Houses*" and seduced "*captive silly Women*" (*Seasonable Thoughts* 370; 2 Tim. 3:6-7). Conjuring an image of a Bacchanalian frenzy, Chauncy quoted an unbelievably "*extravagant*" account of a typical revivalist gathering in which "Women rend off their Caps, Handkerchiefs, and other Clothes, tear their Hair down about their Ears, and seem perfectly bereft of their Reason" (106). He reminded his readers that Davenport in particular was prone to strip off his clothes in public, which allowed for all kinds of interpretation.

Even more blameworthy in Chauncy's eyes were women and girls who were encouraged by revivalists to "speak in the assemblies for religious worship," thus violating the Lord's commandment that "*women keep silence in churches*" ("Enthusiasm" 13). In 1741, one Massachusetts woman, Bathsheba Kingsley, created a stir when she received "immediate revelations from heaven," stole a horse, and took off to spread the gospel. Her actions were recognizable from the standard revivalist repertoire, but the fact that she was a woman made her behavior seem even more dangerous. She was apprehended and reprimanded by a council of religious worthies, Jonathan Edwards included, but defiantly chose to continue her mistaken path.

Kingsley's was not an isolated case.<sup>25</sup> It was as if Anne Hutchinson's ghost kept rising from her fiery grave. "Old lights" gasped almost in unison that theirs were the most trying times.

While surveying the Great Awakening, it is important to acknowledge the role of publishing in fanning the flames of these controversies. These events were fueled by an unprecedented outburst of pamphleteering that turned the revivals into the ground for rhetorical warfare. The Great Awakening, just like the Revolution that came on its heels, should be appreciated as a period of contentiousness that forced Americans to confront the uses and abuses of various sensationalist technique in religion, politics, and literature.

Opponents of revivals, for their part, made substantial efforts to discredit the revivalists' sensationalist proclivities. They created a distinct genre of writing that detailed various forms of religious lunacy in America, some of which have already been mentioned. Tristram Land's *Letter to the Rev. Mr. Whitefield* (1739), which was addressed to the general reader rather than Whitefield, was written as a warning to the colonists to be on alert about the mayhem which revivals could cause. The anonymous *State of Religion in New-England* (1742) and Charles Chancy's *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion* (1743), a lengthy book that absorbed various testimonies of revivalist misdemeanors, became anti-revivalist classics. Solomon Williams, for his part, exploited Davenport's renunciation of revivalist efforts in a series of instructional pamphlets that outlined Davenport's religious crimes and his subsequent conversion.

Revivalists, undeterred, were equally prolific. Whitefield, aided by his many supporters, penned several works directed against his detractors.<sup>26</sup> Thomas Prince

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<sup>25</sup> Catherine A. Brekus's *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America: 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

launched *The Church History*, a weekly periodical that ran from 1743 to 1745, whose contributors wrote to dispel various misconceptions about the revivalists' efforts. Jonathan Edwards fought his own war against his detractors with scores of sermons, pamphlets, and lengthy treatises in which he defended his public image against various accusations hurled at him: *The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New-England* (1743), and *Misrepresentations Corrected, and Truth Vindicated* (1752). The rhetorical war in which the revivalists were engaged was further complicated by various conflicts among the revivalists themselves.

The question of whether the Great Awakening made a substantial impact on American history, particularly on the Revolution, is unavoidable. Is there a connection, for example, between the anarchical spirit of the revivals and the rise of revolutionary sentiment three decades later? Can the Great Awakening be regarded as a political rather than strictly religious phenomenon? For some historians, links between the revivals and the Revolution are hard to ignore. Alan Heimert, whose *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* sparked much interest in the subject, was one of the first scholars to argue that the revivalists' extremism is parallel to the political radicalism of the revolutionary era. More recently, Frank Lambert made a similar assertion that the political unrest of the 1770s grew out of the Great Awakening. He emphasized the revolutionary character of the revivals by arguing that what was remarkable about them was their political impact. The revivals "defied civil and ecclesiastical authority to preach the message of the New Birth without regard to existing

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<sup>26</sup> See *Some Remarks on a Late Pamphlet Intituled the State of Religion in New-England Since the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield's Arrival There* (1742), in which Whitefield attacked Chauncey's book as "base and wicked" (3). It was followed by several editions of the "Answer to . . . an Anonymous Pamphlet, Entitled, Observations upon the Conduct and Behaviour of a Certain Sect Usually Distinguished by the Name of Methodists" (1744). William Hobby, a revivalist-sympathizer, offered his defense of Whitefield in "An Inquiry into the Itinerancy, and the Conduct of The Rev. Mr. George Whitefield" (1745).

institutions and laws” (*The Founding Fathers* 208). Ultimately, the Great Awakening helped create what Lambert called a “free market of religion.” It was only a matter of time before religious disagreements would lead to political tensions. Sacvan Bercovitch’s argument in *The American Jeremiad* offers yet another way of appreciating the significance of the Great Awakening. As he saw it, the revivals were manifestations of the colonists’ apocalyptic fever, which eventually helped ferment the revolutionary sentiment of the 1770s.<sup>27</sup>

Although some historians warn against overestimating the political impact of the revivals, particularly against the idea that the Great Awakening was one of the major causes of the Revolution, the connection between the religious upheavals of the 1740s and the political unrest of the 1770s certainly exists on at least in two levels. In social terms, the Great Awakening helped destabilize whatever sense of religious and political homogeneity we can discerned in the early colonial period. The revivals in the American colonies created a volatile environment in which revolutionary debate was finally made possible. We should also appreciate the revivals’ impact on rhetorical conventions in the colonies. The contentious climate created by the Great Awakening simultaneously exposed and promoted American writers’ fascination with sensationalism. In that complex intellectual climate, the notions of “truth” and “authenticity” became objects of contention rather than faith. It is in these respects that the revivals foreshadowed the outbreak of the revolutionary debates of the 1770s.

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<sup>27</sup> For a helpful survey of other scholarly works on the subject, see Gordon S. Wood’s “Religion and the American Revolution,” in *New Directions in American Religious History* (ed. Harry S. Stout and Darryl G. Hart; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

## THE RHETORIC OF THE REVOLUTION

The American Revolution is rightly regarded as one of the most significant political events in world history. Without a doubt, the principles institutionalized in its aftermath made a substantial impact on every part of the world in the way people everywhere view politics. What we also have to acknowledge is the sensationalist character of the revolutionary debates and understand their dynamic in relation to the sensationalist tradition that emerged in the English colonies. After all, the revolutionary period was a period of rhetorical warfare and struggles between conflicting views rather than a straightforward process of evolution toward a new way of thinking.

The contentiousness of the political debates that took place in the revolutionary era is often downplayed in historical studies—and was downplayed even by many contemporaries who were engaged in those debates. Instead of acknowledging the ideological chaos of that period, they made efforts to create the impression that the Revolution was a providential event, the country's inevitable realization of its democratic destiny. In their view, the Revolution was a continuation of a long but straightforward journey. It began with the arrival of the first English colonists who firmly believed in the sacredness of their mission in the New World. It continued with the colonists' struggle to preserve the purity of their religious views and the autonomy of their political institutions. As the generation of 1776 looked back on almost two centuries of the colonial history, American revolutionaries successfully justified their efforts with a blend of religious and political rhetoric borrowed from their Puritan predecessors. As Sacvan Bercovitch explains at length in *The American Jeremiad*, revolutionaries often described “the emerging conflict for independence in apocalyptic terms,” which echoed the Puritans' apocalyptic rhetoric, and invested their vision with a sense of divine destiny (121). The main argument of Joel Barlow's once popular epic poem *The Vision of*

*Columbus* (1787) is quite telling; the conquest of America was ordained by God himself while the Revolution of 1776 marked the beginning of a new golden age that would lead to “the political harmony of mankind.” Timothy Dwight’s epic *The Conquest of Canaan* (1785) made a similar point in that it drew a parallel between Joshua’s conquest of the Promised Land, which was sanctioned by God, and the American war for independence. Thomas Barnard, in his 1795 Thanksgiving sermon, put this idea in simple terms: “We are a people peculiarly favoured of Heaven” (Tuveson 31). This belief seemed to be so common that George Washington, in his first Inaugural Address, stated that “every step” in the formation of the United States was “distinguished by some token of providential agency” (Joint Congressional Committee 2). The trend of projecting such a perfect sense of order on history was even further reinforced in the decades after the Revolution, when more and more Americans took part in the tradition of expressing respect for their country by casting reverent glances on its revolutionary past. What they wanted to find in that past was a sense of vastness and grandeur in the ideas upon which, they believed, their country was founded. It is quite evident, for example, in John Trumbull’s famous paintings “The Signing of the Declaration of Independence” (1819) and “General George Washington Resigning his Commission” (1824), which were meant to create the image of the Revolution as an orderly and grandiose transformation. We cannot find in these paintings even a single hint that the Revolution was actually a troublesome and chaotic period (Figs. 2.5 and 2.6).

Trumbull’s strategy was understandable, because any acknowledgment of disagreements among the founders of the republic was hardly desirable. In the public imagination, the Revolution was the fulfillment of the nation’s destiny. This view was shared by nearly all Americans—who could not agree on anything else. Ministers of various congregations continued to use their pulpits to propagate the notion that the Revolution was ordained by God. Secular writers, for their part, promoted the idea that



Figures 2.5 & 2.6: John Trumbull's "The Signing of the Declaration of Independence" and "General George Washington Resigning his Commission" (1819-24).

the Revolution embodied the spirit of the Enlightenment and inaugurated the new order for the ages, *novus ordo seclorum*, the concept which became the motto on the Great

Seal. Indeed, the Revolution grew to become a point of common reference for every American; the nation could heal its divisions simply by reminiscing about the greatness of the Revolution's promise.

For our part, we should be careful not to read historical change as the orderly development of certain ideas. History is a mess. Revolutions in particular are periods of intense argument and conflict, highlighting people's differences rather than their common fascination with some grand ideal. Revolutions are not glorious advents of new ways of thinking but painful cataclysms and parricidal reversals of logic in which the past is destroyed and rewritten. Revolutionary logic is not the logic of cause and effect but, ultimately, of effects that create their causes—of the sensations that create their own stimuli in what becomes a rampant scandal that everyone *feels* but few *understand*. Therefore, it is not entirely appropriate to analyze the American Revolution in terms of rational justifications. For most Americans at the time, it was a prolonged period of political crisis.

Political cartoons of the revolutionary era remind us that it was primarily a period of contention, when rhetorical warfare often broke into physical fights. "A House Divided against Itself Cannot Stand" (1787) recalls the acrimonious debates over the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in Connecticut (Fig. 2.7). The state, symbolized by a wagon, is pulled apart by two different fractions (Federalists and anti-Federalists). The intense acrimony between them is particularly well captured in the exchange between the two men who appear to be defecating at each other (front, right). "Congressional Pugilists" (1797) is a dramatized rendition of the fight that took place on the floor of the United States House of Representatives between Matthew Lyon of Vermont and Roger Griswold of Connecticut (Fig. 2.8). There was, in short, nothing peaceful the American society at that time.



Figures 2.7 & 2.8: “A House Divided against Itself Cannot Stand” (1787) and “Congressional Pugilists” (1797).

With this in mind, we can trace the origin of the Revolution not only to the proto-republican ideas of the Enlightenment and the nascent republicanism of some colonial

legislatures, but also to the religious and political scandals that flared in the colonies with amazing frequency throughout the colonial period. To return to the point made in the previous section, the anarchical spirit of the Great Awakening and the scandalous pamphleteering that accompanied it made a tremendous impact on the increasingly revolutionary climate in the colonies. The sense of disorder which the revivals created was undeniable. Regardless of how well-intended Edwards's and Whitefield's efforts were, what people remembered most about the revivals was that the controversy they created clearly undermined the existing social order. The theological subtleties of Edwards's works, which earned him the reputation of being one of the leading American philosophers of the eighteenth century, were not as interesting to the general public as the flurry of contentious pamphlets and journalism which the revivals provoked. The impact of that pamphlet warfare was tremendous. It loosened the ideological cohesion of the colonies by accentuating the diversity of American political views. It created a new rhetorical culture of argumentation in which print media ceased to be the voice of authority, as it was in the earlier periods, but became a place of conflict. These developments helped create an environment in which enduring social and political ideas could finally be contested, paving the way for the revolutionary debates of the 1770s.

The sensationalist excesses of the revolutionary debates clearly reflected the changes in the rhetorical culture of the day. On the surface, the intensity of the verbal crossfire between the colonies and Britain reflected American grievances about various forms of injustice perpetrated by the British. American pamphleteers claimed that it was their duty to respond to such injustices. They adopted an overly alarmist and emotional tone to suggest their righteous indignation about the crimes against their fellow Americans. This explanation, however, is hardly convincing. It was true that colonists had legitimate reasons to complain about British policies in the colonies, but the volume and intensity of many American pamphlets are notably excessive and even unreasonable.

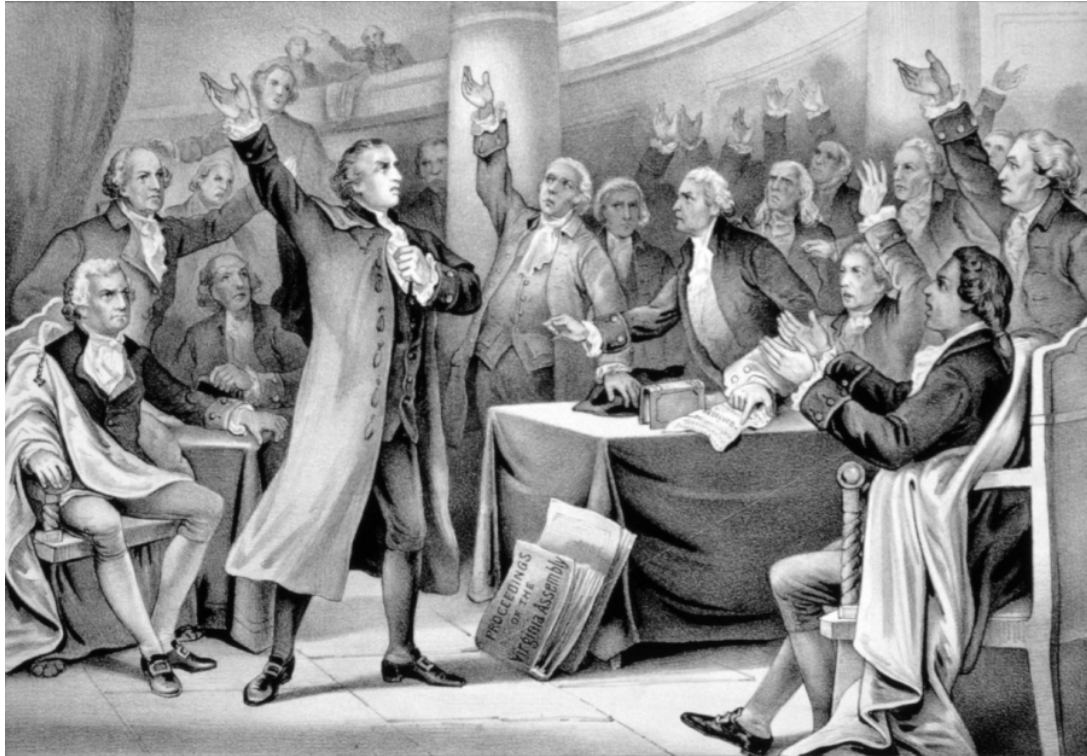


Figure 2.9: Popular images of Patrick Henry's address before the Virginia House of Burgesses typically emphasize the sensational effect of his words.

Pamphleteers were wrong about many things. There was neither religious nor political persecution in the colonies. Taxes were substantially lower than they were in Britain or anywhere in Europe. Americans also enjoyed the economic benefits of being part of the vast British Empire. It is therefore understandable that pro-independence patriots often had to resort to shocking claims to dispel the public's sense of its complacency.

A particularly telling example of this trend is the revolutionaries' shameless abuse of the term *slavery* to describe their own condition. Thomas Jefferson, who was intimately familiar with slavery, wrote in 1774 that British policies toward the American colonies amounted to nothing less than "a deliberate, systematical plan of reducing us to slavery" (Randal 212). Washington eagerly agreed. He also believed that Britain was "endeavoring by every piece of art and despotism to fix the shackles of slavery upon us"

(Brodie 96), to which John Adams added that British rule would make Americans not only slaves but “the most abject sort of slaves, to the worst sort of masters!” (Adams, *Works* 4.28). Examples of such sensationalist rhetoric were amazingly common in the revolutionary era, but nothing came close to Patrick Henry’s famously indignant give-me-liberty-or-give-me-death speech in the Virginia House of Burgesses in March of 1775. “There is no retreat but in submission and slavery!” he screamed at those who doubted the urgency of the situation: “Our chains are forged! Their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston! The war is inevitable—and let it come!” (Randall 226). The intensity and adamancy of such speeches were moving. After all, how could one be calm while describing the crimes perpetrated by the British? And who could question a patriot’s feelings? Josiah Quincy, in his polemic against America’s alleged oppressors, knew well that the effectiveness of his words depended, to a large extent, on conveying his feelings, not his ideas: “I speak it with grief—I speak it with anguish—Britons are our oppressors: I speak it with shame—I speak it with indignation—*we are all slaves*” (Brodie 96).

Such explicit manipulation of the public’s emotions was new. If in the past, sensationalist techniques were widely used but not appreciated, now they were openly embraced with eagerness. The transition is particularly noticeable in the evolution of American attitudes toward such sensationalist concepts as inward feeling, enthusiasm, and common sense.

It was during the Revolution that the concept of *enthusiasm* shed its negative connotations. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century, as we saw earlier, enthusiasm was generally perceived as an emotionally unbalanced state that undermined a person’s rational faculties. To be enthusiastic meant to be misguided. Then, within a relatively short period between the height of the revivals in the early 1740s and the first stirring of the Revolution in the late 1760s, enthusiasm suddenly acquired remarkably positive attributes, particularly in the eyes of the revolutionaries. Alexander Hamilton’s

remark, in this respect, was quite typical: “There is certain enthusiasm in liberty, that makes human nature rise above itself, in acts of bravery and heroism” (*Farmer Refuted* 70). Josiah Quincy, in his pro-independence pamphlet, went on to encourage Americans to follow the example of their English ancestors who “rose with a divine enthusiasm against *the first Charles*” (*Observations* 70). Indeed, as one English preacher observed, enthusiasm burned in the bosom of every American. It was the “ardor with which all glow in one common cause” (*American War Lamented* 10). When, several decades later, Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaimed that “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm,” he could safely count on his readers’ appreciation of this concept (*Complete Works* 2:321). By the middle of the nineteenth century, when he wrote his essays praising enthusiasm as a virtue, Americans were clearly meant to see this concept as something to be desired rather than feared.

The term *common sense*, which entered into general use in the eighteenth century, was equally contentious. It had several related usages. In philosophical circles, it was known as the concept articulated by John Locke and later adopted by Thomas Reid, the main force behind what became known as the Scottish School of common sense. In everyday usage, the phrase *common sense* was used colloquially in less defined terms; it stood for a form of basic intuition without which reason alone was utterly helpless. In this respect, common sense was seen as an undisputed standard of behavior. It was believed to be shared by all normal people who could recognize the difference between good and bad. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts, this term often appeared in the phrase “reason and common sense of mankind.”

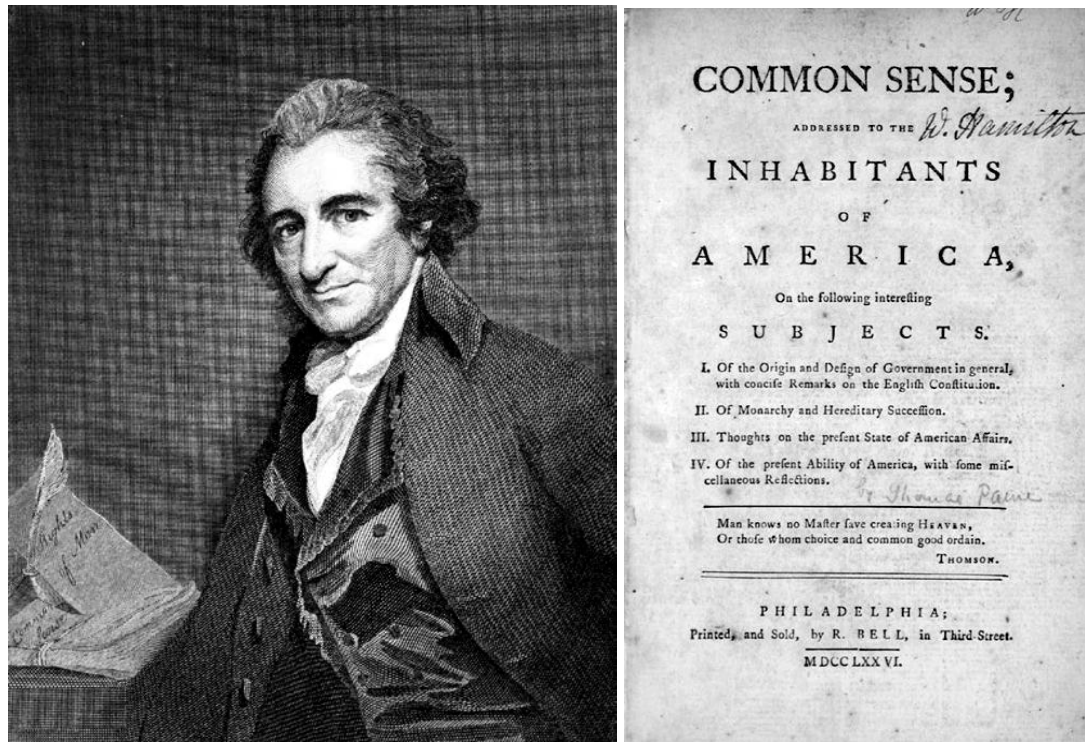
Controversies over *common sense* were fueled not only by the vagueness of the concept’s definition but also its closeness to another contentious concept, the *inward feeling*. The latter, as we saw earlier in this chapter, was popularized by revivalists, particularly by George Whitefield, who emphasized the importance of emotions in

religious experience. For other writers, such as Charles Chauncy, the term *inward feeling* had different connotations; it stood for an innate predisposition to revere God, “an overpowering sense of the divine authority” (Chauncy, *Nathanael’s Character Display’d* 22). Considering their ambiguity, we can see why it was so easy to confuse these terms. Both *inward feeling* and *common sense* refer to what can be described as an innate psychological component that predisposes a human being to sense manifestations of the divine and to react appropriately in different situations. The presence of something good, for example, evoked good feelings. When one was exposed to anything abnormal or unjust, however, one’s common sense was meant to spark a feeling of indignation. What this idea entailed was that one had to treat feelings not as a distraction but a validation of one’s ability to react appropriately.

The difficult and irresolvable question was, obviously, how to distinguish stirrings of undesirable emotions and the natural excitement of common sense. This question was at the core of the Great Awakening scandals as well as the revolutionary upheavals of the 1770s. Various parties claimed to be guided by common sense while accusing their opponents of lacking it. It was inevitable that the debate over these concepts aggravated revolutionary debates generally. American revolutionaries, for their part, claimed that independence was a perfectly reasonable solution based on common sense. The 1775 proclamation of the Continental Congress, for example, justified its plea for an armed resistance to Britain by appealing to “a Reverence for our Great Creator, Principles of Humanity, and the Dictates of Common Sense.” The following year Thomas Paine published his famous pamphlet *Common Sense*, in which he advocated American independence in similar terms. His strategy was clever; to refuse to agree with his arguments was tantamount to admitting to a lack of common sense. British anti-revolutionary writers followed the same strategy. They were also quick to demonstrate their reliance on common sense. In 1775, in Britain, there appeared an anonymously

published book with the title *Common Sense*; its author argued that any man of common sense would regard the war for independence as something utterly undesirable and simply wrong. He went on to accuse the revolutionaries of being guided by “enthusiasm and avarice” rather than common sense (88). What the writers on each side alleged, in other words, was that their opponents were guilty of subverting the notion of common sense and misleading the public. It was ironic—an irony which contemporaries were quick to notice—that the concept signifying a universal characteristic of mankind incited such radically different responses.

The publication of Paine’s *Common Sense* in January of 1776 set the controversy ablaze again, and with more flair. In what would become the most popular pamphlet of that period, the author offered his argument for independence in remarkably simple terms. He declared that any form of monarchy is abhorrent in the eyes of God and outlined numerous economic advantages for the colonies’ independence from Britain. Although such arguments had been circulating in North America for some time, Paine was better than anyone else at conveying his points with an amazing simplicity that appealed to the general public. The pamphlet’s success was unprecedented. As Henry Cabot Lodge enthusiastically recalled in *The History of the Revolution* (1898), *Common Sense* “went far and wide with magical rapidity.” Its sales reached over 100,000 copies within just a few months (perhaps as many as 500,000, if we are to trust some estimates): “It appeared in every form, and was reprinted and sold in every colony and town of the Atlantic seaboard. Presently it crossed the ocean, was translated into French, and touched with unshrinking hands certain chords in the Old World long silent but now beginning to quiver into life.” As Lodge concluded, *Common Sense* was such an important work that it “marked an epoch” and became firmly embedded in the political mythology of the United States (1.154-5).



Figures 2.10 & 2.11: Thomas Paine and the title page of *Common Sense*.

We should acknowledge that the popularity and significance of *Common Sense* lies not only in its arguments but also the author's artful manipulation of the concept of common sense and his awareness of its ambiguity. On the surface, he used the term as it was used by many other writers who saw common sense as a basic and universal human trait. To this end, Paine sought to assure his readers that his was "the simple voice of nature and of reason" (68). His pamphlet offered "nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense" (79). Why were these points important? Because his readers were expected to agree with the author for fear of being perceived as insensitive and misguided. To agree with Paine was to assert that one was human. This is why Paine pointed out that he wrote specifically for "Man to whom Nature hath given the Power of feeling" (66). When exposed to the "naked truth" of his arguments, readers were

expected to side with the author because his evidence provoked their natural indignation at the injustice perpetrated by the British in the American colonies. As Paine implied, only an unfeeling person could fail to understand the logic of his argument.

Paine's strategy was an important step in the history of American sensationalism. Like his predecessors, he subscribed to the notion that the public's emotions could be manipulated for legitimate purposes. He believed, for example, that it was perfectly acceptable for people to be passionate and enthusiastic about important issues. What was revolutionary about Paine's sensationalist approach, however, was that he put much more emphasis on the role of emotions in rhetoric than his predecessors. In his view, emotional manipulation of the audience could be used not only to get important points across but also as a tool for the audience to validate its ability to discern the ideas which were deemed self-evident. As he explained, this approach meant

not inflaming or exaggerating matters, but trying them by those feelings and affections which nature justifies, and without which, we should be incapable of discharging the social duties of life, or enjoying the felicities of it. I mean not to exhibit horror for the purpose of provoking revenge, but to awaken us from fatal and unmanly slumbers, that we may pursue determinately some fixed object. (85)

Paine's contemporaries could appreciate this line of thought because it promised the colonists a sense of much needed unity at a time when they were torn by endless disagreements. Paine's insistence that his argument was based on purely natural—rather than abstract—foundations created the potential for national harmony that transcended the philosophical and religious disagreements that fueled the revolutionary debates. At a time when the question of independence was tearing communities apart, *Common Sense* advanced the idea that the solution it offered was predestined. Its acceptance was not only a political necessity but, essentially, a natural human reaction. *Common Sense* was

designed to give the impression that Paine merely supplied words to fundamental ideas that simply begged to be written down, not proved. The pamphlet, to quote Lodge once again, “gave utterance to the dumb thoughts of the people; it set forth to the world, with nervous energy, convictions already formed; it supplied every man with the words and the arguments to explain and defend the faith that was in him” (1.155). In this respect, *Common Sense* paved the way for a new form of rhetoric in which sensationalism played a more crucial role than it had ever done.

His success notwithstanding, Paine was still an easy target for those who distrusted his sensationalist approach. He was attacked on various grounds and from every direction—by his cohort of revolutionaries and their opponents alike. Paine's case reminds us that sensationalist rhetoric still remained controversial even when it was used for ostensibly legitimate purposes. James Gillray's cartoon “Wha wants me” (1792) reflects Paine's image of a dangerous anarchist (Fig. 2.12). It depicts him wielding a dagger, trampling tradition law, and advocating anarchy, atheism, and “equality madness.”

British writers who opposed American revolutionary efforts were quick to condemn the ideas expressed in pamphlets like Paine's. Their responses, such as James Chalmers' pamphlet *Plain Truth* (1776), routinely blamed enthusiasm for arousing rebellious sentiment and complained that the American revolutionaries abused the concept of common sense to justify criminal intentions. Isaac de Pinto, in *Letters on the American Troubles* (1776), went so far as to accuse pro-independence colonists like Paine, who in the author's view were guilty of enthusiasm, of “prophanation of the sacred name of liberty” and promoting “principles of anarchy, of tyranny, and of despotism” (9-10). Even more exemplary in this respect was Charles Inglis's pamphlet *The True Interests of America* (1776), in which he offered a “dispassionate” and “judicious” argument against the colonies' independence from Britain. He blamed Paine for



Figure 2.12: James Gillray's caricature of Thomas Paine as an anarchist (1792).

exploiting “*the passions of the populace at a time when passions are much inflamed*” (v). “In this he imitates all other enthusiasts and visionary affectors of paradoxes” while attempting to provoke “*uncommon frenzy*” among Americans, “*poison their minds, and seduce them from their loyalty and truest interest*” (v, vi). Inglis’s choice of epigraphs,

from Terence and Tacitus, also reflects his disdain for Paine's manipulative and sensationalist style: "Quin mali [sic] narrando possit depravari [everything can be distorted by being told badly]" and "obtrectatio et livor pronis auribus accipiuntur [we lend our ear to distraction and spite]." Other attacks on Paine were more creative. One writer compared the colonists' democratic aspirations to a drug-induced frenzy that engendered "licentiousness which must inevitably be [their] ruin" (Fisher Ames 6). The author of *Buff; or, a Dissertation on Nakedness* (1792) amused his readers by parodying Paine's obsession with "naked truth" to make it seem as if Paine was advocating public nudity. He pointed out that if we were only to substitute the word "truth" for "nakedness," we could have a few laughs about Paine's famous assertion that "such is the irresistible nature of truth, that all it asks,—and all it wants,—is the liberty of appearing."

Even some of Paine's fellow revolutionaries were dismayed by his sensationalist streak. Many of them shared Paine's political ideas but were suspicious of methods that relied so heavily on sensationalist techniques. John Adams, for example, was quite disdainful of what he called Paine's "daring impudence" (*Works* 2.508), while warning his readers against "fits of humor, starts of passion, and flights of enthusiasm" (*Thoughts on Government* 11). Years later Adams even called Paine's pamphlet "a poor, ignorant, malicious, short-sighted, crapulous mass" whose author got more credit than he deserved. Adams could not reconcile himself to the prospect that later generations would "ascribe the American Revolution to Thomas Paine" (*Works* 10.380-1). What bothered and at the same time impressed Paine's contemporaries was his ability to reach a wide audience by casting pro-independence arguments in such sensationalist terms. Adams complained at one point that Paine's work was merely "a tolerable summary of the arguments which I have been repeating again and again in Congress for nine months" and that "there is not a fact or a reason stated in it, which I had not frequently urged in Congress" (2.508-9). At the same time, he had to give Paine some credit for promoting

the revolutionary cause in ways that appealed to common people, for whom “arguments” in themselves mattered far less than their “weight.” “The wise, and the worthy,” Paine remarked, “need not the triumph of a pamphlet,” but the masses did (65). What Paine’s remark implied was that the ability of pro-independence arguments to provoke and arouse the public was as important as the philosophical foundation of these arguments. Many of Paine’s contemporaries could agree with this; in its pure form, enthusiasm is akin to democratic fervour.

Others disagreed, particularly as time went on and the country grew weary of revolutionary mayhem. In the aftermath of the American war for independence Americans were startled by reports of violence and terror in the name of freedom during the outbreak of the French Revolution. As a result, the political climate in the United States grew increasingly reactionary. It was crucial, as some prominent Americans insisted, to save the country from democracy, or at least save democracy from the people. It was naive to expect commoners, who were believed to be guided by their passions rather than reason, to effectively govern the state’s affairs. In the words of Gouverneur Morris, a prominent American statesman and one of the framers of the constitution, democracy was the negation of all government. It could lead to chaos. Theodore Dwight, the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, was particularly explicit in his disdain for democracy when he proclaimed that its goal was to

destroy every trace of civilization in the world, and force mankind back into a savage state. . . We have a country governed by blockheads and knaves; the ties of marriage with all its felicities are severed and destroyed; our wives and daughters are thrown into the stews; our children are cast into the world from the breast and are forgotten . . . Can the imagination pain anything more dreadful this side of hell? (Henry Adams 225)

British cartoonist, who seemed to enjoy visualizing the excesses of the French Revolution, terrified the public with images of mayhem caused by common people's thirst for power. "The Plundering of the King's Cellar" (1793) depicts a violent horde of drunk commoners reveling in destruction of the king's palace (Fig. 2.13). Was it not a true image of republicanism? James Gillray's "Un Petit Souper a la Parisienne, or A Family of Sans-Culottes Refreshing after the Fatigues of the Day" (1792) is an even more shocking image in its emphasis on what could happen if oppressed people gained power (Fig. 2.14). In it, *sans-culottes*, working-class people who supported the Revolution, greedily devour bodies of their victims in a grisly feast which was meant to symbolize the



Figure 2.13: "The Plundering of the King's Cellar" (1793).

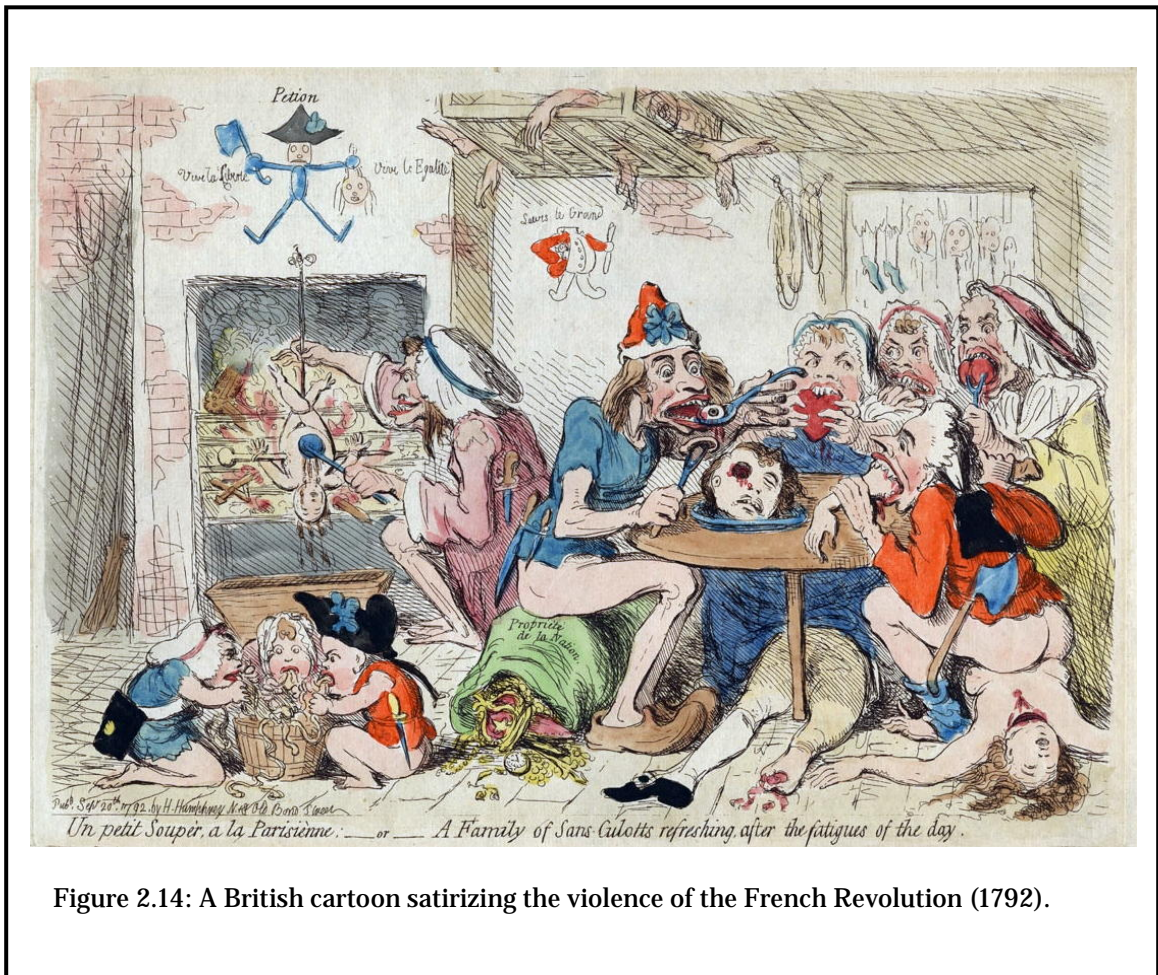


Figure 2.14: A British cartoon satirizing the violence of the French Revolution (1792).

revolutionary mayhem brought about by republican ideas.

Sensationalism, in short, was perceived to be a dangerous game. As Alexander Hamilton remarked in a very telling statement, nothing good ever came out of blind reliance on the common man's so-called reason, which in his view was "for the most part governed by the impulse of passion." Understandably, Hamilton had no appreciation for those, like Paine, who professed to rely on reason while drawing their strength from the irrational impulses of their audience. The American democracy experiment had become, Hamilton lamented in 1802, "the competition for the passions of the people." It was an environment in which "the vicious are far more active than the good passions" (*Works* 6.541). Hamilton did not necessarily have Paine in mind when he wrote this, but we should take note of his unquestionable hostility toward the kind of sensationalism Paine

practiced in his works. It is understandable that as time went on, Paine's image in America grew increasingly negative. For many Americans, he was, simply put, a vociferous pest. He was decried as an atheist, anarchist, and provocateur who exerted bad influence even after his death. As one journalist deridingly wrote in 1819, Paine's relics continued "to enrage & inflame an ignorant mob . . . . Many of these mobs have flags with the name of Paine inscribed upon them, and [his] bones will, no doubt, be triumphantly carried about , and give rise to extraordinary excitement & commotion" ("Thomas Paine's Bones").

Paine's flamboyant career and tragic fate reminds us how conflicted Americans were in their attitude toward sensationalism. Admired at first as the voice of the Revolution and later rejected as a dangerous anarchist, Paine had, when compared to his fellow revolutionaries, an ambiguous image of someone whose sensationalist proclivities were simultaneously appreciated and feared. What his story and the other examples which we have surveyed in this chapter suggest is that American writers and readers were always uncertain about the benefits and dangers of sensationalist rhetoric. Perhaps *uncertain* is the wrong word. What early American writers always felt obliged to do was to balance their style between two equally prominent trends in American rhetoric—the enduring tradition of sensationalism, which was firmly embedded in American culture, and the tradition of mistrust of sensationalism.

The paradox of American sensationalism became codified in American rhetoric. For many American writers, it was not a question of taking sides in the debate about the benefits and dangers of sensationalist rhetoric. They had to engage in a rhetorical game in which sensationalism was embraced and rejected at the same time. This trend is quite evident, for example, in the political sermons and Independence Day orations that became popular in the early Republic. Caught in the contradictions of American sensationalism, orators often felt the need to appeal to the public's intelligence while

exploiting its revolutionary zeal. As if following the model of Puritan sermons, such orations became occasions for emotional rituals of enthusiastic reverence for core American values. John Pickering's 1804 oration, for example, reminded the audience about the "heroic zeal" and "the ardent feelings of our fathers" whose memory "could justly excite in our bosoms, that honest and lively enthusiasm, which the delightful prospect of a great, free, and permanently happy people" (5). At the same time Pickering expressed alarm about excesses of revolutionary vigor. There were some people, he complained, who still delighted in "captivating" by means of "mischievous tales" of the Revolution in order to excite the rebellious sentiment which was "destructive of social order and directly tending to the overthrow of our government" (11). The same paradox of evoking and denouncing sensationalism can be perceived in Joseph Story's oration which was delivered the same year. At first, he proclaimed that Americans should strive for "moderation," "coolness of resolve," and "maturity of judgment." After all, "Such were the minds of the venerable sages who conducted us to independence" (33). He then went on to warn his audience against the temptation of indulging its emotions in what had become popular recollections of crimes committed against the country. He said this, however, right before indulging the public with violent imagery that could not help but excite feelings of indignation:

we forgive the brutal revenge of our revolutionary foes . . . and pass the wholesome lesson to posterity. Can we forget the time when, to glut our passion, our cities were wrapped in flames? our widows and children impaled on the bayonet? our wives and mothers exposed to the merciless ravisher? (16-7)

How could one tell upon hearing this oration whether emotional manipulation was a positive or undesirable thing?

This strategy of simultaneous evocation and condemnation of revolutionary zeal reflected a larger trend. Story found himself, like America at large, in a strange situation: rebellious yet obedient, enthusiastic yet cold-headed. His oration was yet another reminder of America's unresolved affair with sensationalism—and of the fact that by the early 1800s the tradition of sensationalism was essentially codified in what can be described as formal American rhetoric.

### CHAPTER III

#### DYING CRIMINALS AND THE EXECUTION STYLE OF AMERICAN RHETORIC

“There is a propensity in man to take pleasure in the sight or relation of human sin and suffering. Thousands flock to the execution of a criminal, and the history of his life, however dull and uninteresting, is sought and read with avidity. No part of a newspaper excites so much attention as the record of crime and calamity. Some have pronounced this curiosity a depraved appetite: we hold the contrary. It is almost universal and therefore natural. It is the object of this work to gratify this feeling in the manner the most advantageous to the public.”

Henry St. Clair  
*The United States Criminal Calendar: Or an Awful  
Warning to the Youth of America; Being an  
Account of the most Horrid Murders, Piracies,  
Highway Robberies, &c. &c., 1832*

**Précis:** Their diversity notwithstanding, public punishment rituals in early America were always designed to serve important purposes. As a rule, they were used by the authorities as suitable occasions to promote dominant religious, political, and social ideas. As such, early American punishment rituals relied on what can be described as institutionalized forms of didactic sensationalism, which laid the foundations of early American crime literature. But contentious as this subject was, it could not but help provoke a debate over the questions whether such rituals were ethical.

## AWFUL SIGHTS: EARLY AMERICAN PUNISHMENT RITUALS AND CRIME LITERATURE

Nowhere the pervasiveness and contradictions of American sensationalism are as apparent as in punishment rituals, particularly executions, and crime literature. They became common as early as the seventeenth century, when religious and civil authorities began to exploit punishment rituals for didactic purposes. Some basic aspects of such rituals and crime literature remained fairly unchanged well into the nineteenth century. At the same time, methods of conducting public punishments and their coverage in print underwent several significant transformations. Most notably, those transformations were evident in two areas: the changes in the rituals' didactic goals and the role allotted to their observers.

We can discern three distinct periods in the evolution of American punishment rituals. In the early colonial period, as Daniel Cohen and Karen Halttunen demonstrate in their studies, executions were generally conducted as somber affairs which were used strictly for didactic purposes—primarily to reassert important religious doctrines.<sup>28</sup> In the Puritan conception of sin, capital crimes were explained not as isolated occurrences but as manifestations of common human depravity. This is why each crime was believed to be shared by everyone—because everyone, if one was not careful about his or her spiritual affairs, was potentially a criminal. For this reason, execution ceremonies were routinely turned into rituals of exposing human propensity for sin. They served as occasions to force people to confront their sinful inclinations. The role which was allotted to those who witnessed such rituals was therefore well-defined; spectators were expected

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<sup>28</sup> See Daniel A. Cohen's *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), the opening chapter of Karen Halttunen's *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), and Ronald A. Bosco's "Lectures at the Pillory: The Early American Execution Sermon" (*American Quarterly* 30.2 [1978]): 156-76).

to watch executions and relate to the condition of the doomed.

In the eighteenth century, the concept of crime and the role of those who attended punishment rituals became notably different from what they were in the early colonial period. Crime, for example, was increasingly often described not as a reflection of common depravity but as aberrant behavior; criminals grew to be regarded as complete outcasts whose criminal behavior was sharply contrasted with the sense of normalcy shared by law-abiding people. The audience and readers of execution literature, for their part, were no longer obliged to compare their condition to that of criminals. In new punishment rituals that emerged in the post-revolutionary period, the public became free to distance itself from criminal behavior of the condemned by expressing its moral outrage and jubilation at the triumph of justice.

In the nineteenth century this trend led to further changes in the dynamic of punishment rituals, in which attendants were given an even more active role than they had in the past. On some occasions, public was even expected to go beyond expression of its dismay about crime and actually take justice in its hands. This trend clearly reflected the increasingly radical spirit of American democracy, in which people's involvement in social affairs was deemed essential for the wellbeing of the republic. This explains, in part, why Americans in the nineteenth century grew to perceive discussions of crime—and various forms of crime literature as well—as an important component of the public discourse about American democracy.

\* \* \*

The rise of American crime literature in the seventeenth century was anticipated by Americans' concerns about crime and their ways of exploiting punishment rituals for didactic purposes. It became apparent in the first decades of colonization. As some colonists complained, New England experienced unusually high crime rates, which forced the subject of crime to the center of many discussions. William Bradford even felt

compelled to offer a theory about the proliferation of crime in New England. The main culprit in his view was of course Satan; he incited criminal behavior among colonists and was suspected of “carry[ing] a greater spite against the churches of Christ and the gospel here” than in any other country (385, spelling modernized). The other reason was equally important. As Bradford argued, the crime rate in the colonies *seemed* higher than in Europe because of the colonial authorities did not hide instances of criminal behavior but actually made sure to expose each crime, even the worst cases, “to the view of all.” Unlike their European counterparts, magistrates in New England made good efforts to apprehend criminals and to make their persecution an object of public awareness. Bradford writes,

here (as I am verily persuaded) is not more evils in this kind, nor nothing near so many by proportion, as in other places; but they are here more discovered and seen, and made public by due search, inquisition, and due punishment; for the churches look narrowly to their members, and the magistrates over all, more strictly than in other places. Besides, here the People are but few in comparison of other places, which are full & populous, and lye hid, as it were, in a wood or thicket, and many horrible evils by that means are never seen nor known; whereas here, they are, as it were, brought into the light, and set in the plain field, or rather on a hill, made conspicuous to the view of all. (386, spelling modernized)

Bradford’s explanation reveals an important aspect of colonists’ way of persecuting crime; culprits were punished publicly and their crimes were brought “into the light.” Furthermore, public punishments were invariably used for didactic purposes to reinforce religious teachings. This strategy contributed to the erroneous impression that crime in

the colonies was rampant.<sup>29</sup>

The audience's role in such rituals reflected this approach. They were not intended as sensational and voyeuristic spectacles. Punishment rituals were conducted as remarkably somber events, which offered the public occasions for religious introspection. When Nathaniel Hawthorne, in the middle of the nineteenth century, looked back at early New England, he was quick to point out the sharp contrast between the seriousness of punishment rituals in the seventeenth century and the irreverence with which they were conducted in his own day. The contrast is particularly apparent in the "Market-Place" chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, in which he described a Puritan punishment ritual of a woman who was accused of adultery. She was made to stand at the gallows as a spectacle for other colonists. What Hawthorne emphasizes in the following passage was the solemnity of that ritual and its impact on the spectators:

The scene was not without a mixture of awe, such as must always invest the spectacle of guilt and shame in a fellow-creature, before society shall have grown corrupt enough to smile, instead of shuddering, at it. The witnesses of Hester Prynne's disgrace had not yet passed beyond their simplicity. They were stern enough to look upon her death, had that been the sentence, without a murmur at its severity. . . . Even had there been a disposition to turn the matter into ridicule, it must have been repressed and overpowered by the solemn presence of men no less dignified than the Governor, and several of his counsellors, a judge, a general, and the ministers of the town; all of whom sat or stood in a balcony of the meeting-house, looking down upon the platform. When such personages

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Purvis asserts that "the incidence of lawbreaking was dramatically lower in the British provinces than in the modern United States . . . . In terms of crime, modern Americans live in a society four times more threatening than the one inhabited by their colonial forebears" (307).

could constitute a part of the spectacle, without risking the majesty or reverence of rank and office, it was safely to be inferred that the infliction of a legal sentence would have an earnest and effectual meaning. Accordingly, the crowd was sombre and grave. (41-2)

The soberness of such events is also quite apparent in the images that accompanied broadsides and pamphlets about executions in the colonial New England. They usually depict punishments as remarkably well-attended and orderly rituals, which were commonly used as occasions for religious moralizing (Fig. 3.1).

The procedures leading to executions reflected the rituals' didactic character. The condemned were usually imprisoned for a lengthy period of time, during which a minister worked with them to explain their spiritual condition and, in case of executions, prepare them for God's judgment. This period also afforded the criminal a chance to repent his or her crime—perhaps even to pen a confession. The day of execution was elaborately organized as well. It generally began with a sermon that included a

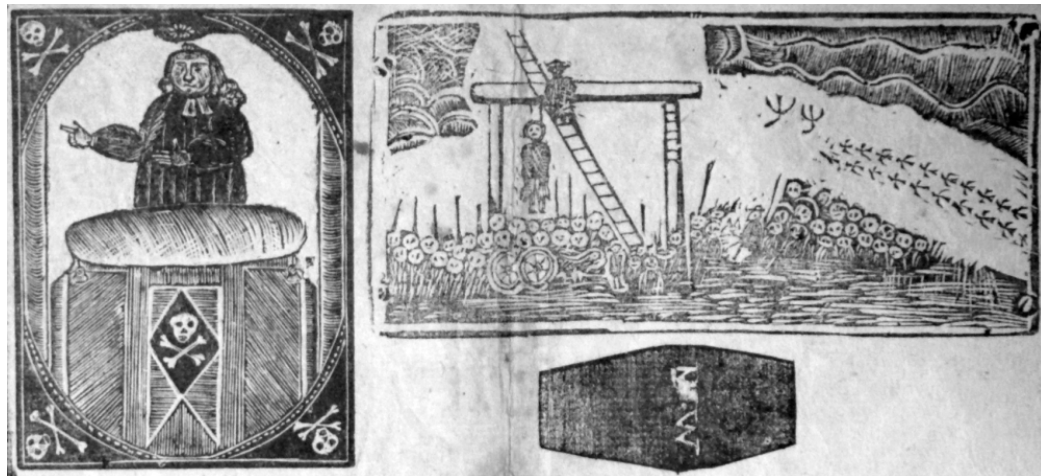


Figure 3.1: Woodcut. "Dialogue between a Reverend Clergyman and Daniel Wilson" (1774).

methodical discussion of the culprit's crime and an explanation of its significance in the larger social and religious context. All the while, the public kept its eyes on the culprit, reading his behavior like a suspenseful book.<sup>30</sup>

Somber as New England punishment rituals were, they also had some sensationalist overtones. We should not doubt that the ministers who worked with criminals and delivered execution sermons had, for the most part, noble and serious intentions, but it is noteworthy that their methods often included various forms of emotional manipulation of the condemned and of those who attended executions. Incarcerated criminals, for example, were subjected to repeated visits from ministers who encouraged them to confess their crimes and realize, as clearly as possible, the horror of eternal damnation. During such sessions, ministers forced the doomed to relieve their crimes and contemplate their depravity. All the while the condemned were constantly reminded about the punishment they could expect from God, which made such sessions quite intense for criminals as well as the readers who perused the accounts of such confessions. Cotton Mather, in an exemplary passage from *The Converted Sinner* (1724), described intimidating criminals in his care with images of "*Sore Plagues*" and "*strange Punishments*" that awaited them in hell: "You will be thrown into a *Place of Torment*; and be chained up in *Blackness of Darkness, forever*; where the *Devils*, to whom you have been *Children & Vassals*, will insult you, will torture you, will be very uneasy Companions to you" (35). Even the "Almighty GOD now *Mocks* you, shake off your *Chains*, and come out of the *Flames*. No, No; He says to you, *Why don't you Cry unto me, to take off your Chains, and pluck you out of the Flames?*" (37).

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<sup>30</sup> Lorne Dwight Conquergood, on whose study I am relying here, explains the suspense of such rituals in the following terms: What riveted audience attention was whether or not the condemned had truly repented, and, even if so, would her or his faith hold fast under the tremendous distress and horror of 'the present circumstances of Terrification'? . . . Puritan audiences scrutinized the body and speech of the condemned for 'Signs of Divine Grace,' and when they recognized true penitence then they could interpretively reframe the hideous torture of a hanging into a catalyst of salvation" (346).

What was even more provocative about such intimidating sermons was that ultimately the recipient of ministers' threats was not the condemned criminals but the audience that attended executions and, with proliferation of publishing, the readers of pamphlets about executions. To a large extent, punishment rituals were designed to warn the public about the dangers of sinfulness by comparing the condition of those who attended or read about executions to that of doomed criminals. In this respect, executions were ritualistic reminders of what everyone in the audience could expect if one did not make an effort to confront one's sinful nature. As we can notice in the title of Cotton Mather's execution pamphlet *Instructions to the LIVING, from the Conditions of the DEAD* (1717), ministers' conversations with doomed criminals had to be read as ministers' conversations with their readers. "Yours is the danger," Benjamin Colman told the readers of his pamphlet titled *It is a Fearful Thing to Fall into the Hands of a Living God: Sermon Preached to Some Miserable Pirates* (1726). Although the title of Coleman's sermon suggests that his words were directed toward "some miserable pirates," the pamphlet was written for the benefit of all colonists. It was meant "to strike the heart of the hardest Sinner with the utmost fear" by using what Coleman called an "awakening *discourse* that might bring divine light with *flame* and burning into [people's] *hardened* and insensible Souls" (1, 22). An even more telling example of how ministers exploited execution rituals is Cotton Mather's pamphlet *Speedy Repentance Urged: A Sermon Preached at Boston . . . at the Request of one Hugh Stone, a Miserable Man under a just Sentence of Death, for a Tragical and Horrible Murder* (1690). In it, Mather was quite direct in his strategy of using executions as occasions to communicate with the public:

We have now before us, a very *miserable* [criminal], but we cannot excuse the hardness of our own Hearts, if it be not also a very *profitable*, Spectacle. You see a poor man in *Irons* here, whose crying *Murders* have

now procured unto him that Sentence, which will not permit him to live many hours longer in the world. *His Case* do's truly Preach to *You*, the same that *my Text* will Preach to *Him*, but while I have an Eye to *his* particular circumstances, I shall not so overlook *yours*, as to leave any one person in this vast Congregation without the *Food* proper in the present *season* for them. (2-3)

What we have to notice in this passage is how quickly the author shifts his attention from the criminal on the scaffold to the people who came to see the execution. It was as if the scaffold, which was the focal point of the ritual, was merely a catalyst for introspection. While ministers went over the crimes committed by the condemned, everyone in the audience was meant to become aware of his or her own sinful inclinations. To recall another work with a telling title, *Advice from the Dead to the Living: or, a Solemn Warning to the World* (1732), ministers clearly preached for the benefit of the public, not of the condemned:

Now may the Congregation hear,  
This awful voice, and stand in fear,  
And being timely warn'd thereby,  
May do no more so wickedly.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, Puritan execution sermons went so far as to encourage everyone to share the responsibility for criminals' transgressions. As ministers tirelessly reminded their congregations and readers, seeds of criminality were planted in everyone. Therefore, public was expected not to distance itself from the condemned but to relate to criminals' spiritual condition. To quote one of Samuel Danforth's sermons, "the spectators" of

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<sup>31</sup> Other examples of this approach include Cotton Mather's *The Call of the Gospel Applied unto All Men in General, and unto a Condemned Malefactor in Particular* (1686) and *A Sermon Occasioned by the Execution of a Man Found Guilty of Murder Preached at Boston in New-England, March 11th 1685/6* (1686).

executions were as guilty as “the Sufferers” on the scaffold (*The Cry of Sodom Enquired Into* 13). It was true even when a criminal was executed for a rather unusual crime. The fact that Danforth’s sermon was delivered on the occasion of Benjamin Goad’s execution for bestiality, which was not a particularly common transgression, did not prevent the minister to force his audience to relate to Goad’s condition. “If we ransack our own hearts, and search and try our ways,” Danforth spoke, “we shall finde such sins with us, as may justly provoke Divine Wrath and Vengeance.” He added: “The heart is the Seed-plot of Murther, Adultery, Fornication, Lasciviousness, and of all manner of iniquity. . . The gross and flagitious practises of the worst of men, are but Comments upon our Nature . . . . The holiest man hath as vile and filthy a Nature, as the *Sodomites*, or the men of *Gibeah*” (14).

The assumption of everyone’s guilt is even more apparent in that ministers’ execution sermons often echoed the sermons delivered on occasions other than executions. Colman’s sermon in which he denounced criminals’ “*profaness, cursing and bitterness, swearing, and blasphemy, drunkenness and revelings, contempt of religion and profanation of the Lord’s Day, whoredom and uncleanness*” almost word for word echoed the accusations which ministers regularly leveled against the entire colony. To recall the famous proclamation which was adopted in the aftermath of the 1679 synod, colonists were guilty of all sorts of crimes: disrespect for the authorities, “inordinate affection to the world,” “inordinate passions,” intemperance and “other hainous breaches of the seventh Commandment.” Women in particular were guilty of

Laying out of hair, Borders, naked Necks and Arms, or, which is more abominable, naked Breasts, and mixed Dancings, light behaviour and expressions, sinful Company-keeping with light and vain persons, unlawfull Gaming, an abundance of Idleness, which brought ruining judgement upon Sodom, and much more upon Jerusalem (*Magnalia*

*Christi Americana* 5.90).

Several years after the publication of that report, the colony's governor used the same language in his report about the state of affairs in the colony. Then in 1706 and again in 1727, when New England was shook by earthquakes, Increase Mather and his son following the same trend and declared that the calamities must have been signs of God's displeasure with colonists' sins. When panicked Bostonians approached Cotton Mather for some spiritual comfort, they were faced with nothing but accusations of their sinfulness: "there is not one Unregenerate among us, but what say, *I have no Assurance, that I shall not be in Hell before Morrow Morning*. How can any Man dare live so? Now, an Immediate *Process of Repentance* is the only security" (*The Terror of the Lord* 26).<sup>32</sup> In that culture, no one could escape ministers' accusations of inequity, not even when one witnessed a criminal's execution for a rare and unusual crime.

The tradition of forcing public to relate to criminals was rooted in the basic Christian assumption that everyone is innately depraved. According to the concept of original sin, which is one of the main components of Western Christianity, Adam's and Eve's sin haunt the entire human race. John Calvin, whose principles American Puritans claimed to embrace, pushed this idea even further by making the doctrine of total depravity one of the five major components of his theology. It is therefore understandable that Puritan ministers, who adhered to Calvinists principles, habitually reproached their congregations and readers for their predisposition to sin. Michael Wigglesworth, in his immensely popular poem *The Day of Doom* (1662), captured the spirit of Puritanism by stressing that *all* his readers seemed to be bound for hell: "Thou

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<sup>32</sup> See Increase Mather's *A Discourse Concerning Earthquakes. Occasioned by the Earthquakes which were in New-England, in the Province of Massachusetts-Bay, June 16. and in Conecticot-Colony, June 22. 1705. Also, Two Sermons, SHEWING, That SIN is the Greatest EVIL; AND, That to Redeem TIME is the Greatest Wisdom* (Boston, [1706]) and Cotton Mather's *The Terror of the Lord: Some Account of the Earthquake* (Boston, 1727).

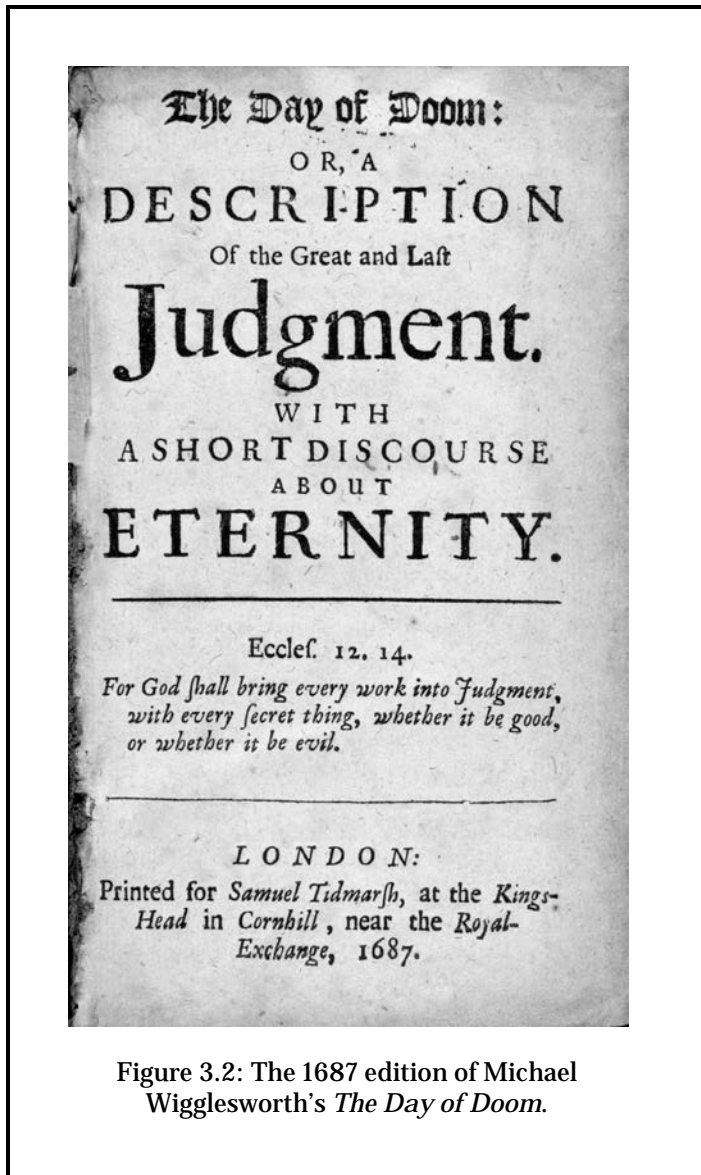


Figure 3.2: The 1687 edition of Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom*.

hangest over the Infernal Pit / By one small thread, and car'st thou not a whit? / There's but a step between thy Soul and Death. . .” (61). Such emphasis on man's total depravity was echoed in scores of Puritan sermons, but nowhere as loudly as in Jonathan Edwards' “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741).

The eternal damnation, Edwards declared, awaited nearly everyone. Lest this point went unheeded, he conjured exceptionally vivid images of the ensuing torment: “The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or

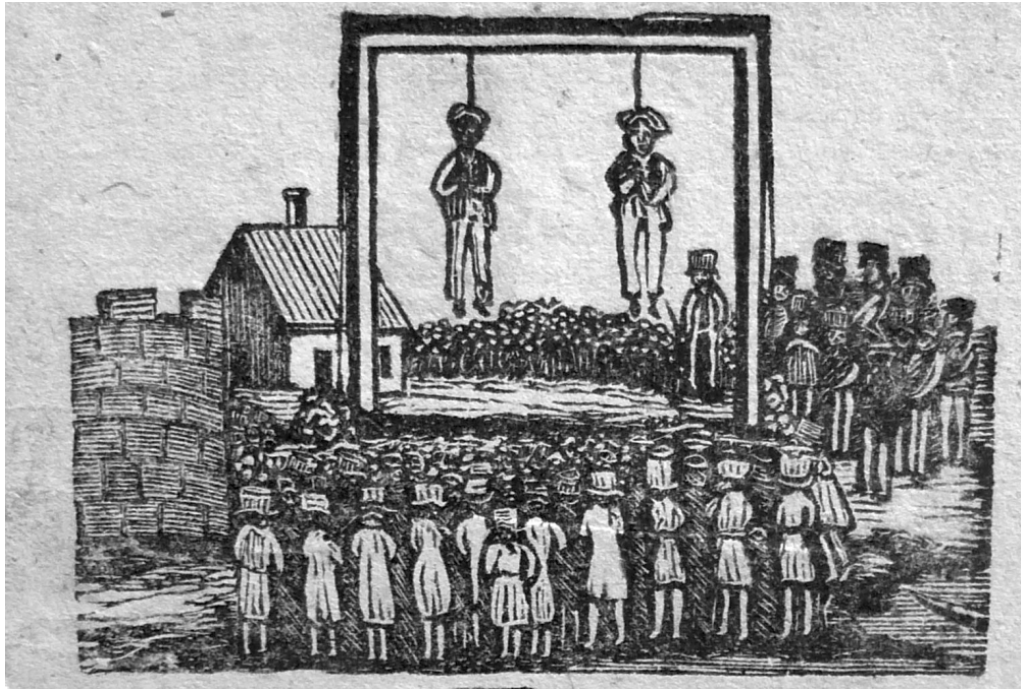
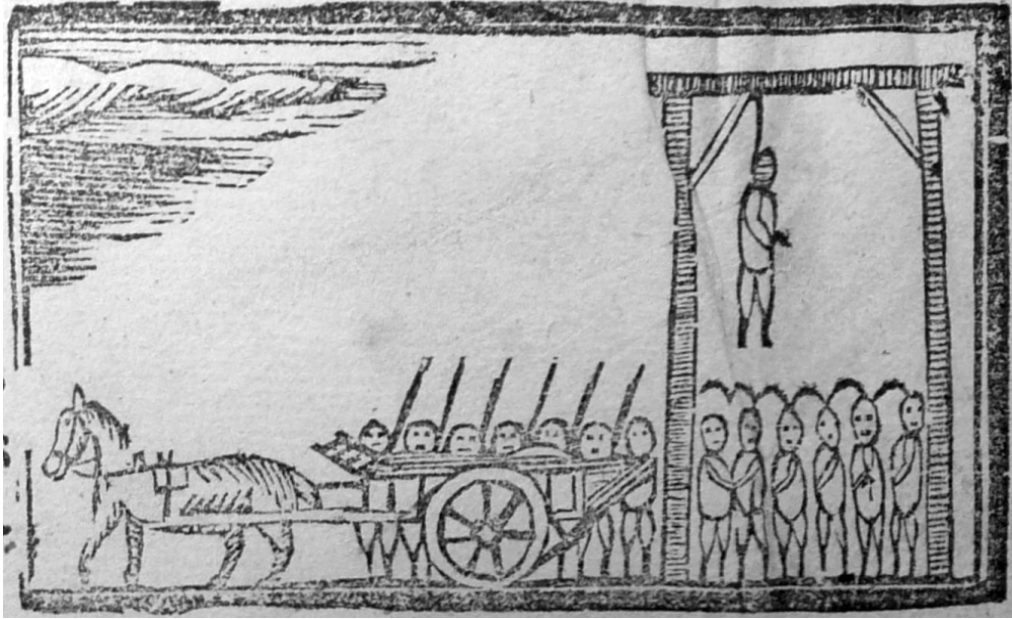
some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire” (3.170). God will, with pleasure, “crush you under his feet without mercy; he will crush out your blood, and make it fly, and it shall be sprinkled on his garments, so as to stain all his raiment” (3.173). It can be said that the sadistic lyricism of Edwards' sermon outdid the most provocative Jewish prophets:

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held

over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment. (3.171)

The Puritan notion common depravity, which is so apparent in Wigglesworth's poetry and Edward's sermons, made such a substantial impact on early American crime literature. The proliferation of crime literature in New England reflected the trend of exploiting punishment rituals for didactic purposes. Indeed, American crime literature was born when ministers felt compelled to turn their execution sermons into pamphlets to reach as many people as possible. A typical execution pamphlet from that period is simple in its structure; it consists of a sermon alone and is occasionally followed with a moralistic conclusion. To ensure their wide circulation, execution sermons were published as cheap and skinny pamphlets. Their popularity was even further enhanced by the fact that they were aggressively promoted as educational publications.

With time, such publications became more elaborate in their structure and content, which made them more meaningful and appealing to readers. An increasing number of pamphlets included not only sermons but also such materials as ministers' interviews with doomed criminals, last minute confessions, accounts of criminals' conversions, and instructive essays. Such innovations certainly contributed to the diversity of early American crime literature, but what should be acknowledged is that in spite of such innovations, it preserved its didactic character. As Cotton Mather indicated in *Pillars of Salt: An History of Some Criminals Executed in this Land for Capital*



Figures 3.3 & 3.4: Woodcuts in “A Poem Occasioned by the Untimely Death of Hugh Henderson” (1737) and “Confessions and Execution of the Pirates” (1831).

*Crimes* (1699), a collection of horrid tales, his book was published for no other reason than to “correct and reform” the public’s morals and “to suppress growing vice” (59). In this respect, Mather’s strategy reflected the sensationalist approach adopted in many

American works about crime; their authors easily defended their interest in crime by claiming that their works were written for the benefit of their countrymen. To quote Coleman once again, it was necessary to write about “this awful and awakening Subject” in order to affect people’s “hardened” hearts. This argument was the basic and most convincing justification of sensationalism in colonial America and beyond. It is apparent in scores of popular crime collections that appeared after Mather’s *Pillars of Salt*, including *The American Bloody Register* (1784), *The United States Criminal Calendar: or An Awful Warning to the Youth of America; Being an Account of the Most Horrid Murders, Piraces [sic], Highway Robberies* (1832), *The Lives of the Felons, or American Criminal Calendar* (1847), and Charles Summerfield’s *Illustrated Lives and Adventures of the Desperadoes of the New World* (1859).

Newspapers in the early republic often printed execution accounts of the same nature as those we can find in some seventeenth-century publications. There were plenty of reports depicting criminals’ transgressions as manifestations of common sinfulness. Ministers continued to make efforts to publish accounts of their work with the condemned for the benefit of the public. Some images on execution broadsides in the nineteenth century looked identical to those that appeared in the previous century in that they portrayed punishment rituals as orderly and solemn (Figs. 3.3 and 3.4). Emotional outbursts in the audience were rare. Even when spectators expressed their sorrow, their reactions, particularly as they were described in print, did not escape the confines of the role which was allotted to them.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Some of the following execution reports, which appeared in early nineteenth century, highlight the influence of Puritan didactic tradition of exploiting such occasions: “The Execution of Wild Robert; Being a Warning to All Parents” (*Cheap Repository* 29 [1800]: 31), “The Last Words, Confession, and Dying Speeches of William Wilson, Who was Executed at Chelmsford for Murder” (*Cheap Repository* 34 [1800]: 33), and Moses C. Welch’s *Gospel to be Preached to All Men, Illustrated, In a Sermon, Delivered, In Windham, At the Execution of Samuel Freeman, a Mulatto* (Windham, 1805). For more elaborate discussions of execution rituals in the late eighteenth century, see the “Design

But while acknowledging the endurance of seventeenth-century punishment rituals, we should be careful not to assume that their conventions remained unchanged. As we will see in the rest of this chapter, punishment rituals started to undergo notable changes in the eighteenth century, which was apparent in several areas: executions sermons and publications started to shift the public's attention from religious to secular concerns; criminals gradually ceased to be depicted as common sinners; and the audience's involvement in punishment rituals became more active.

#### AFTER PURITANISM: PUNISHMENT RITUALS AS CELEBRATIONS OF JUSTICE

New forms of punishment rituals in the British America started to emerge sometime in the eighteenth century. They were notably less formal than those in the seventeenth century. What also made them different was that they ceased to promote the notion of common sinfulness and allowed the public to appreciate punishment rituals as celebrations of justice rather than as occasions for introspection.

The informalization of rituals, which manifested itself in the rise of all sorts of popular punishment ceremonies, can be a reaction to formalization of laws in the colonies. It reflected changes in the British legal system, which in the eighteenth century became more centralized. This trend could not help but contribute to the rise of

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of Public Executions in the Early American Republic” chapter of Louis P. Masur’s *Rites of Execution: Capital Punishment and the Transformation of American Culture, 1776-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Gabriele Gottlieb’s “Theater of Death: Capital Punishment in Early America, 1750-1800” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pittsburg, 2005). In her work, Gottlieb makes an important point about execution rituals in the late eighteenth century, which suggest that such rituals were influenced by seventeenth century conventions: “The execution day was the pinnacles of ultimate state power – the taking of a human life – in a carefully staged ceremony in front of a large crowd. The lessons of the execution day were geared towards building community cohesion and order by reinforcing principles of social discipline and morality. Each participant – the ministers and civil officials, the condemned, and the crowd – had ‘assigned’ roles to play in this theater of death” (14-5).

alternative rituals, which could enable the public to regain some control over the judicial process.<sup>34</sup>

Yet another sign of change was secularization of capital punishment. As people's concerns shifted from religion, which dominated punishment rituals in the seventh century, to other social issues, so did punishment rituals and crime literature. Increasingly often, particularly in the revolutionary period, punishment rituals began to emphasize the importance of civic duty rather than religious conformity. One's responsibility toward God became essentially overshadowed by one's responsibilities to the state and community. What remained unchanged, however, was that punishment ceremonies continued, in the Puritan fashion, to be exploited for didactic purposes.<sup>35</sup>

This trend affected the way criminals were depicted in sermons and crime reports. As we remember, in the seventeenth century criminals were generally perceived as common sinners who went astray; Puritan punishment rituals expected everyone to recognize oneself in those who were on the scaffold. By the late eighteenth century the situation was different. By that time, criminals were increasingly often described as utter outcasts who had little in common with law-abiding members of their communities. Consequently, people were not necessarily expected to relate to criminals but encouraged to express their disapproval of criminal behavior; the scaffold ceased to be a reflection of communal sinfulness and became a focal point of people's dismay about criminal behavior. As a result, the dynamic of executions changed. They became what

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Meranze writes: "If seventeenth-century court days were often ramshackle affairs held in ramshackle surroundings, in the eighteenth century court buildings and court rituals became more elaborate and formidable. Indeed, in Virginia the authority of the courts and the ritualization of court proceedings generated struggles between attorneys who wished to seize control of the law and lay critics who argued that the courts were becoming a world apart from the community" (200).

<sup>35</sup> For more detailed analyses of this cultural transformation, see Karen Halttunen's "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture" (*American Historical Review* 100.2 [1995]: 307-34) and Louis P. Masur's *Rites of Execution*.

Conquergood called “rituals of retribution and expulsion” (351).<sup>36</sup> By executing a criminal, a community celebrated its moral superiority. Thus executions could be regarded as dramatizations of deliverance; they reminded the public about the pervasiveness of crime that threatened communities while at the same time offering some assurance of tranquility by removing (executing) those who threatened that tranquility. Even with the rise of various social reform movements in the nineteenth century, whose proponents insisted that crime was as a manifestation of such social factors as racism and poverty, the new tradition of treating criminals as outcasts remained quite strong.

To understand these changes, we have to look at some relevant seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rituals that made an impact of punishment ceremonies in New England. One particularly remarkable ritual was Pope Night. It was celebrated on the anniversary of the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, when a group of Catholic extremists, led by Guy Fawkes, nearly succeeded in blowing up the Parliament and assassinating the royal family along with the country’s entire political elite. November 5, when the plot was uncovered, became known in England as Guy Fawkes Night and was celebrated with bonfires, fireworks, and burning of the conspirators’ effigies. In some respect, Guy Fawkes Night can be viewed as a joyous execution ritual; it centered on symbolic execution of criminals while implicitly affirming the social values against which those criminals rebelled. What we should note, of course, is that the dynamic of such celebrations was quite different from the spirit of punishment rituals the Puritans promoted.

The fate of Guy Fawkes Night in New England was precarious. After all, the Puritans were not particularly fond of celebrations. As we saw earlier, the Puritans saw

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<sup>36</sup> Conquergood’s argument relies on the one Karen Halttunen made in *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*.



Figure 3.5: Woodcut. "Extraordinary Verses on Pope-Night" (1768).

punishment rituals as occasions to remind everyone of everyone's depravity whereas the celebrations like Guy Fawkes Night essentially enabled participants to emphasize their righteousness and moral superiority. We should also recall that the Puritans had a notably ambivalent attitude toward James I and his successors, whose deliverance was celebrated on Guy Fawkes Night. In fact in 1649 English Puritans went so far as to put James' son Charles I to death. It is therefore understandable that many New Englanders could not master enthusiasm to celebrate the deliverance of the king whose son their English brethren executed. At the same time, colonists could not avoid the holiday altogether for fear of being perceived unpatriotic, particularly with the rise of Anglican population in New England. They found the following solution.

Instead of celebrating Guy Fawkes Night, which hurt the Puritans' sensibility, New Englanders modified the ritual and turned it into what they called Pope Night (or Pope Day). What was different about this celebration was that its main culprit was not

Guy Fawkes and his coconspirators but the pope. In a typical Pope Night, New Englanders paraded and burned effigies of Satan and the pope, who in the Puritan world was maligned as anti-Christ, to express their disdain for Catholicism.

Pope Night was quite remarkable as an innovative ritual of condemnation which was different from formal Puritan punishment rituals. Most importantly, it contributed to the trend of dehumanizing criminals. The pope and Satan, two common fixtures in Pope Night rituals, were perceived as utter villains to whom one could not possibly relate; instead of relating to culprits, Pope Night revelers simply burned the pope's and Satan's effigies as if to emphasize their irredeemable character. What was also remarkable about those rituals was that it was a celebration rather than a mournful ritual of introspection. Unlike those who attended formal punishment rituals, Pope Night revelers were free to dissociate themselves from culprits and celebrate what they saw as triumph of justice.

The political impact of this new ritual is important to acknowledge. Pope Night was a popular rather than official ritual; it was not even sanctioned by the government, and as such it can be regarded as one of the first rituals of disobedience that emerged in the colonies. What made those celebrations even more politically contentious was that they allowed Americans to vent their anger about various public issues. In the 1760s and 1770s, as the situation in New England grew intense, Pope Night revelries were repeatedly used as occasions to scapegoat unpopular public figures and politicians, whose effigies were burned along with those of devils. This was one of many signs that New Englanders' concerns were shifting from religion to political and social issues that became contentions in the late eighteenth century. It is understandable that some

historians even went so far as to argue that Pope Night celebrations made a substantial impact on the rise of the revolutionary sentiment in New England.<sup>37</sup>

The revolutionary period saw an amazing proliferation of other ceremonies that evoked execution and funeral rituals but served as celebrations. Americans expressed their dismay about unjust British policies by staging imaginative rituals that celebrated Americans' hopes in rather dark manner. Mock executions of Loyalists were quite popular. Effigy burning and tarring and feathering, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, were often turned into festive ceremonies in which Americans celebrated their struggle against tyranny by dramatizing the villainy of their enemies. Other rituals were even more striking. Some Rhode Islanders, for example, protested the Stamp Act, which they believed was tyrannical, by staging a dramatic ritual of burying Liberty. Their pessimism was merely ritualistic; when Liberty was about to be buried, she suddenly rose from the dead and, in a symbolic twist, participants buried copies of the Stamp Act in her place (Shaw 180).

The trend of dehumanizing criminals can be related to the way American pamphleteers and politicians depicted enemies in general, be it Satan, George III, or entire countries with which Americans were at war. Colonists' enemies were meant to be perceived as utterly evil. When Americans were engaged in the Seven-Year War, they demonize the French. In his 1760 sermon, Eli Forbes simply called France "the Mother of Harlots" and referred to French Canada as "the Seat of Satan" and "Indian Idolatry" (12, 33). Gilbert Tennent, in another telling example, sought to fuel Americans' antipathy toward France by claiming that French values were completely corrupt and

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<sup>37</sup> Peter Shaw's *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) offers one of the most extensive studies of the ritual's origins and impact. See also Sherwood Collin's "Boston's Political Street Theatre: The Eighteenth-Century Pope Day Pageants" (*Educational Theatre Journal*, 25. 4 [1973]: 401-409) and John Gilmary Shea's "Pope-Day in America" (Jan 19, 1888. Web. *The Library of Congress: American Memory*).

irreconcilable with American ideals, thus reinforcing Americans' sense of superiority.<sup>38</sup> A decade later, as colonists found themselves at odds with their mother country, the same rhetoric was used against Britain. As Thomas Paine famously argued in *Common Sense*, Britons were completely different from Americans because they were artificial and inhuman byproducts of their decadent culture. He referred to Britain as "an open enemy" who was "false, selfish, narrow and ungenerous." He added that to reconcile with such enemies, "whom you can neither love nor honour," would simply be "forced and unnatural" (85). Political rhetoric of this sort made a perceivable impact on the way criminals were depicted in print. It was not a coincidence that it was during the revolutionary period when American punishment rituals moved toward emphasizing criminals' depravity rather than serving as occasions for introspection.

We should also take a note of the increasingly festive character of public rituals in the revolutionary period, particularly the ways Americans celebrated defeat of their enemies. Such occasions were joyous because they marked colonists' deliverance from some grave danger. Typical sermons delivered after major political and military victories encouraged Americans to be festive by appreciating the gravity of the threat from which they were liberated. When in the fall of 1760, during the Seven-Year War with France, colonists learned about their victory in Canada, Eli Forbes proclaimed that it would be "ungrateful beyond Measure, not to feel our Bosoms swell with an unusual Tide of sacred Joy." To do otherwise would be "unnatural" and "ungenerous." The feeling of joy, which everyone was *obliged* to share, was "so universal and compleat" that it was "enough to awake the Tongue of the dumb, and warm the frozen Heart" (7-8). This was the basic

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<sup>38</sup> Gilbert Tennent's pro-war publications included *The Late Association for Defence Further Encouraged: or, Defensive War Defended; and its Consistency with True Christianity Represented* (Philadelphia, 1748) and *The Happiness of Rewarding the Enemies* (Philadelphia, 1756), which encouraged the war against the French as a righteous struggle against the "Papist" and the "Indian Banditti" who threatened "your Estates and civil Liberty" (*The Happiness* 30).

component in rituals of deliverance: celebrations were not possible without some ritual of destroying something bad. Nathaniel Appleton adopted a similar strategy in his 1766 sermon, delivered after the repeal of the Stamp Act, and explained it in the following terms:

Afflictions and fears . . . beget sorrow and mourning: But the removal of real afflictions . . . begets a joy and gladness of heart. And this joy is excited more or less according or in proportion to the occasion. If it be a sore calamity, and a very grievous burden we are delivered from, or if it be at such a critical season when the danger is imminent and very threatening, and our fears run high; removing such a calamity, and scattering such fears as are gathered into distress and horror, creates so much the greater joy and gladness; And sometimes the trouble, or the fear is so great and pressing upon the mind, that the sudden removal of the same excites a joy and gladness beyond what we can express: The salvation may be so great, and so sensibly affect the mind, that men of strong passions, are sometimes thrown into rapturous extacies of joy.—

There is a joy unspeakable and full of glory. (14)

Appleton's emphasis on joy in such rituals reflected the trend in many public ceremonies that emerged during the revolutionary period, including new forms of punishment rituals.

What was obviously dangerous—or at least morally dubious—about this trend was that the celebratory character of punishment rituals could ultimately turn them into a form of entertainment. In fact what many commentators at the time observed was that execution rituals were becoming inappropriately festive. They drew larger and more jovial crowds. Some rituals appeared overly theatrical and celebratory. Their coverage in papers often lacked any sense of solemnity.

John Johnson's execution in New York in 1824 is quite a telling example. It reportedly attracted as many as fifty thousand spectators of "all ages and sexes," "a solid mass of living flesh—men, and women and children, of all colors and descriptions" who were squeezed into the narrow streets of lower Manhattan. The rest of the report gave an even better idea how voyeuristic executions became:

The military escort added to the excitement [but] had nearly created the evil they were intended to prevent. The crowd was so immense that the light horse, in keeping a passage clear for the procession, occasioned much shrieking among the females, particularly those who, in indulge in strange curiosity, had their children in their arms.

Meanwhile the criminal, "like most culprits of late years, exhibited much unconcern at his fate." After his execution, Johnson's body was subjected to some "galvanic experiments" for the benefit of the curious public: the dead man's "muscles of the body were violently convulsed, and even the lips and eye lids were put into motion" ("Execution of Johnson"). For many people who attended that event, it was just a show.

Another reporter who witnessed Johnson's execution shuddered at the apparent immorality of the ritual. He was appalled by the "excitement" of the spectacle and wondered whether "the execution in this public manner, with the parade of the military, and all the show of form and circumstances, has not a pernicious tendency."

To see a human being thus launched into eternity, is an awful sight, but has it any other effect than of shocking the feelings for the moment, and familiarizing the mind with scenes which before were sufficiently appalling to think on? The immense crowd of all sorts of persons, comprising many who view it rather as an amusement than in dread, takes from the solemnity of the occasion, and the only evidence of emotion in the great multitude, is the sudden drawing in the breath, and

the utterance of *He's gone!* at the fatal moment. ("Execution of Johnson at New York")

No matter how much efforts were made to turn public executions into "moral" and "edifying" events, their voyeuristic appeal was obvious to nearly everyone. One correspondent, who witnessed a similar execution in 1810, even went so far as to compare executions to theatrical performance. He sarcastically suggested "a further improvement on exhibition of this kind" by consulting a manager of a theater in order to "give greater-eclat and effect to the spectacle." To make things more dramatic, he proposed that "the [corpses] be broken on the wheel, and them emboweled, beheaded, and quartered, after the true regal English mode, and the relics hung to gibbets till [they] should be devoured by the fowls of the air and their bodies bleached in the winds of heaven." To underscore the gruesome theatricality of such spectacles, he even referred to the period leading to road to the scaffold as the "preparation for [the] exit" ("Human Execution").

Perhaps the most exemplary work that reflects the character of this trend is *The Life, Trial, Confession and Execution of Albert W. Hicks, the Pirate and Murderer* (1860). It describes his execution as an exuberant and voyeuristic spectacle:

Steamboats, barges, oyster sloops, yachts and row-boats, swarmed everywhere in view of the gallows. They had come from all parts . . . . Large steamers, such as carry hundreds of people away on pleasure excursions, were there, so laden with a living freight of curious people, that it seemed almost a wonder that they did not sink incontinently. There were barges there with awnings spread, under which those who were thirsty imbibed lager-bier. There were row-boats, with ladies—no, with females of some sort, in them, shielding their complexion from the sun with parasols, while from beneath the fringes and the tassels they viewed

the dying agonies of the choking murderer. (75)

The ceremony was, in other words, much different from the solemnity of executions in the seventeenth century. This was what Hawthorne had in mind when he contrasted the somberness of the execution rituals in the past and the attitude of his contemporaries who grew “corrupt enough to smile, instead of shuddering” at the sights of what he called “the spectacle of guilt and shame.”

#### RADICAL DEMOCRATIC JUSTICE AND LYNCHING

The trend of turning punishments into celebrations of justice can be related to the rituals in which public was actually drawn into the judicial process and even took it upon itself to conduct justice in ways it deemed appropriate. Such included some controversial punishment and execution methods, including effigy burning, tarring and feathering, mock-executions, and the notorious practice of lynching.

The cause of these developments, as many observers at the time were quick to point out, was lawlessness of the revolutionary period and the radically democratic spirit of the new republic. More astute observers, however, saw this trend as a reflection of the American culture at large, a manifestation of the antinomian sentiment that by the revolutionary period grew to become regarded as a basic cultural characteristic of the new nation. As we saw in Chapter II, the democratic streak of the Great Awakening and the Revolution continuously eroded public respect for law and invested American culture with an undeniable reverence for common sense and antinomianism. There was a growing sense among Americans that the legal system was not always efficient—and in some cases even detrimental—to the course of justice. What this idea implied was that it was anyone’s right, if not responsibility, to respond with indignation to any manifestation of injustice and even to assume the task of conducting justice.



Figure 3.6: A mob with an Effigy.

The first notable signs of this trend became apparent in the two decades leading to the Revolution. Protests against what Americans saw as Britain's attempt to impose unjust laws on the colonies contributed to the rise of the notion that laws were not always just and that common people were capable judges of all affairs in their communities. The impact of the Stamp Act of 1765, which was one of the major factors in the rise of revolutionary sentiment of the revolution, is the case in point; Americans' anger over that legislation sparked a series of protests and gave rise to new rituals in which people could actively express their dismay.

Symbolic executions, particularly burning and hanging of effigies, were fairly common. One the first victims was Andrew Oliver, the Boston official whose position obliged him to enforce the Stamp Act. In the summer of 1765, when Bostonians learned



Figure 3.7: American Patriots torture John Malcom.

about the new law, a mob ransacked Oliver's house and hanged his effigy on the Liberty Tree. The same night his effigy was cut down and, in a brazen act of defiance, paraded in front of the Town-House (Fig. 3.6). Pope Day festivities, which by the late 1760s were illegal, offered themselves as occasions for symbolic executions and protests against the government. The pope's effigy was often replaced with an effigy of someone out of favor with the public.

As the situation in the colonies continued to deteriorate, some protesters went beyond burning effigies and started to harass British officials and loyalists directly. American radicals viewed such acts as a form of direct justice, which they enforced with a flair for dramatic rituals. In the fall of 1769 a mob got hold of George Geyser, who was suspected of being an informer for the British. He was not only tarred and feathered but

also paraded through the streets of Boston to inspire “much terror” among people (Rowe 191). Jesse Saville, another informer, met the same fate the following year. Particularly infamous was the 1773 case of John Malcom, a custom officer in Boston. The event gathered an enormous and diverse crowd of twelve hundred enthusiasts. They tarred and feathered Malcom before parading him through the street amidst “Great Noise & Huzzaing” (Rowe 261). The episode inspired a number of reports and colorful prints (Fig 3.7).<sup>39</sup>

Some basic characteristics of such rituals are quite apparent in the images commemorating this event. They generally depict festive crowds of people who celebrate not only the culprit’s punishment but also the fact that the justice was conducted by the people themselves. The images, like the one included here, also suggest the democratic spirit of this ritual by emphasizing the crowd’s diversity (men of different classes, children, nicely dressed ladies with parasols, and even a few dogs). What the image was meant to stress is that this ritual reflects some basic and universal sense of justice which only common people—not lawyers—could uphold.

The jubilant spirit of such occasions, however, could not conceal some anxieties about the radical streak of Enlightenment, particularly about the advent of republicanism and the notion that laws should be dictated and upheld by people. There were some unavoidable questions. Could common people be really entrusted with the task of creating and enforcing laws? Was there any risk that their ignorance would undermine legal institutions and lead to chaos? For many Americans in the late eighteenth century the proliferation of extralegal punishment rituals was a clear sign of lawlessness, not of political progress. They were also appalled by the fact that those who justified such rituals drew inspiration from the works of such influential Enlightenment

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<sup>39</sup> See R. S. Longley’s “Mob Activities in Revolutionary Massachusetts” (*The New England Quarterly* 6.1 [1933]: 98-130).



Figure 3.8: A scene from Shays' Rebellion underscores the violence of the revolutionary period.

philosophers as John Locke and Montesquieu, whose faith in republican principles made a substantial impact of the generation of 1776.

The idea that laws must remain in the hands of people, which implied that people could conduct justice in the ways they saw appropriate, was embraced by many American revolutionaries who saw it as one of the essential political principles of the new age; it can be discerned in Paine's pamphlets, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. Jefferson made this

point painfully clear when he went so far as to defend the unrest known as Shays' Rebellion in 1787, which briefly plunged Massachusetts into the state of anarchy (Fig 3.8). As the future president asserted, people's right to rebel against authorities and enforce their sense of justice could not be infringed: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants" (Brodie 241). Jefferson was convinced, at least at that time, that there was nothing anarchical about his view. It merely reflected the new political order. Even if people's actions were not always logical or beneficial for the society's wellbeing, the occasional violence of rebellions and extralegal punishment rituals was the price the society had to pay for the benefit of being called free. Reports of popular punishment rituals of the revolutionary

era remind us that Americans were conflicted about their republican aspirations and fears of lawlessness. As a result, depictions of extralegal rituals often combined contradictory elements: signs of formalism and spontaneity, order and unruliness.

The coverage of Americans' dismay about Benedict Arnold's treason is the case in point. Arnold, an American general, switched sides to fight for the British in 1780, at the height of the revolutionary war. Outraged Americans, unable to lay their hand on Arnold, reacted by staging various rituals that allowed them to vent their anger. The one staged in Philadelphia in September 1780 was particularly noteworthy, because it exposed a sharp contrast between the formality of such events and reports of their spontaneity (Fig. 3.9). On the one hand, the ceremony was quite formal; it was organized in a military fashion. Arnold's effigy was placed on a cart pulled by a horse. A drummer and a few soldiers marched in front of it. To emphasize Arnold's treacherous character, the effigy was crafted with two faces and dressed in a British fashion. Behind it stood a man dressed as the Devil, with a pitchfork raised in the air. What is also remarkable was that in spite of such well-crafted details the parade was reported to be somewhat spontaneous. The procession was surrounded by a crowd of dancing children and



Figure 3.9: Benedict Arnold burned in effigy in Philadelphia (1780).

jubilant adults, which was meant to give an impression that this occasion was inspired entirely by people's natural indignation. In this respect, this event was what can be described as *a ritual of spontaneity*—it reflected the trend of popularizing punishment rituals while preserving their formalism. The following excerpt from a report about Arnold's effigy burning in Connecticut also captures the contrast between the elements of spontaneity and formalism:

The numerous populace, express'd their universal contempt of the Traitor, by the hissing, explosion of a multitude of squibs and crackers with which they graced his exit; as well as their joy at the timely discovery of his hellish treason, by a beautiful illumination of the town. The whole procession and execution, with all things pertaining to the exhibition, were conducted with the greatest decency and good order. Thirteen vollies were fired by the guards, and three cheers given by the people in testimony of their joy that the States were rid of the traitor, which closed the scene. (“[Burning Benedict Arnold in Connecticut]”)

It was such rituals of spontaneity that laid a foundation for another form of extralegal rituals—lynching—in which citizens' role was even further enhanced to the point that they claimed the right to punish criminals without any interference from the authorities. Lynching is certainly not a uniquely American phenomenon; people in other countries were equally guilty of this grotesque form of injustice, particularly during revolutionary periods. What made things worse in the United States, however, was that this trend was not only wide spread but also rooted in the country's republican principles. It is unsettling that those who justified lynchings relied on the traditions of common sense and antinomianism, which by then were perfectly legitimized in the minds of so many Americans. It allowed some apologists to claim that lynchings reflected a form of natural law; such rituals embodied democratic principles that

harnessed common sense in solidarity with communities' moral standards. Lynch mobs, in such view, were seen as guardians of justice in its most basic form.

Perhaps the most exemplary explanation of how this ritual was justified in republican terms was offered by Hubert Howe Bancroft in *Popular Tribunals* (1887), in which he defended extralegal executions:

The doctrine of Vigilance . . . is that the people, or a majority of them, possess the right, nay, that it is their bounden duty, to hold perpetual vigil in all matters relating to their governance, to guard their laws with circumspection, and sleeplessly to watch their servants chosen to execute them. Yet more is implied. Possessing this right, and acknowledging the obligation, it is their further right and duty, whenever they see misbehavior on the part of their servants, whenever they see the laws which they have made trampled upon, distorted, or prostituted, to rise in their sovereign privilege and remove such unfaithful servants, lawfully if possible, arbitrarily if necessary . . . . In a free republican form of government every citizen contributes to the making of the laws, and is interested in seeing them executed and obeyed . . . . Law is the will of the community as a whole . . . . This is why, when law fails—that is to say, when a power rises in society antagonistic at once to statutory law and to the will of the people—the people must crush the enemy of their law or be crushed by it. (9)

Bancroft's strategy was quite transparent. His argument is steeped in the revolutionary rhetoric, which was attractive to anyone who was fond of such clichés as “a free republican form of government” and “the will of the people.” Many Americans, as one contemporary observer remarked in dismay, were convinced that “law is but their own breath; that the foundation of government is their own wills; that the right to punish is

only what themselves have given” (“The Dependence of Popular Progress”). This was the real reason, as O. F. Hershey observed at the time, why lynchings were so widely tolerated in the United States:

the masses . . . feel that they are the law; they make it, they can unmake it. In lynching an enemy of society they do not mean to violate despise the law, but rather to vindicate and enthrone it. They are acting simply in their sovereign capacity as lawmakers. Laws seem to them local in their origin, therefore local in their application and in their breach; law to them is no longer an institution dominating the community—the community is the law. (467)

The last point in this passage was very important; it resonated with many Americans in the nineteenth century and continues to be widely accepted, even if not openly, to this day.

The proliferation of lynchings in the United States also reflected the fact that this form of punishment was implicitly—and occasionally explicitly—endorsed by some respected figures. We already saw earlier in this chapter that Thomas Jefferson, who was overall respectful of laws, sometimes allowed himself to make comments that could be construed as endorsements of extralegal punishments. The case of Charles Lynch, the man from whose name the term lynching was believed to be derived, is even more revealing about the extent to which this ritual was intertwined with the concept of democracy; in spite of his dubious actions, Lynch was often regarded a prominent militia leader. He earned a lot of notoriety during the War for Independence for his controversial methods of fighting the British and persecuting Loyalists who were suspected of carrying acts of sabotage. Although he had little respect for established legal procedures and his practices alarmed many people, including Thomas Jefferson, Lynch grew to be considered an ardent patriot—and his legally dubious policies were

retroactively legitimized by the state assembly. One of his admirers even went on to call Lynch “one of the first gentlemen in an age and community of gentlemen, whose superiors in true courtliness, manhood, and self-sacrificing patriotism, the world has never seen” (Featherston 150).

American fascination with righteous law-breakers is also evident in the case of Andrew Jackson. As a general, the future president was notorious for prosecuting and executing suspects without much regard for laws. During his 1828 presidential campaign, his opponents published several broadsides and pamphlets, including one titled “Some Accounts of Some of the Bloody Deeds of General Jackson,” which detailed the “appalling acts of this violent and vindictive man” (Fig. 3.10). Those acts included dueling, unlawful executions, and genocide. Those damning details, however, did not prevent him from winning the election with a comfortable margin. It is probably not a coincidence that the number of lynchings continued to rise during Jackson’s presidency.

Sympathetic lynching reports in American press often emphasized the democratic nature of such rituals by drawing parallels between lynchings and popular executions of the revolutionary era. It was suggested that the spontaneity of such rituals was consequence reflection of people’s common sense and righteous indignation about any form of injustice. When a gang of angry South Carolina fathers castrated a school teacher who was suspected of molesting their daughters, numerous reports of that case insisted that the swiftness of people’s actions was not a sign of impatience but a natural reaction to the teacher’s crime and “the universal odium and detestation of his brutal lust” (“Castrated Teacher”). Likewise, the news of another rape, allegedly perpetrated by a slave, was said to “spread like wildfire” so that “the whole country was aroused with indignation. The excitement became intense, the people gathered from every quarter, and the black wretch was taken by the infuriated crowd and first castrated, then hung by his neck until nearly dead” (“An Outrageous Rape and Murder”). Similar lynching

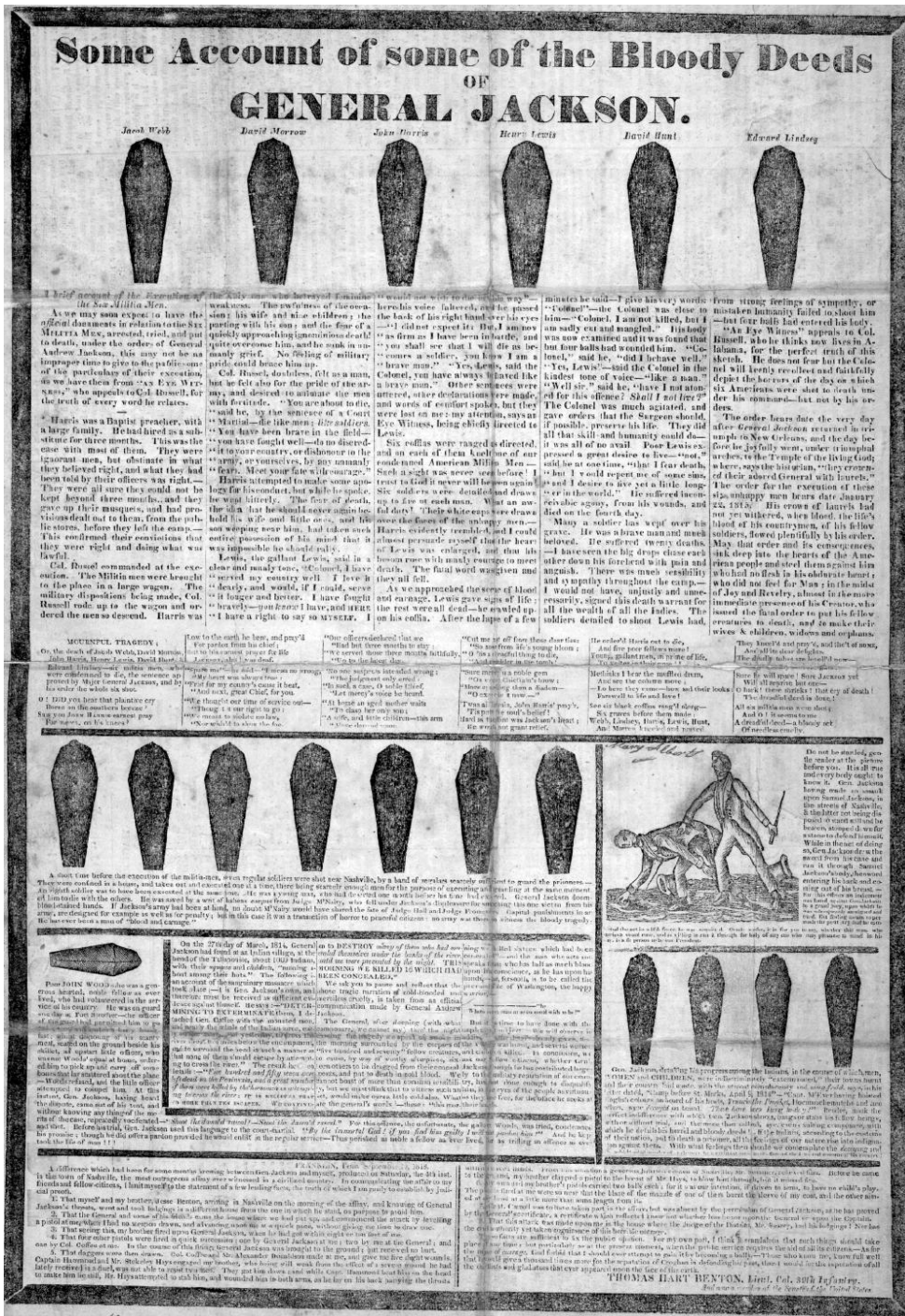


Figure 3.10: Anti-Jackson flier, accusing him of various war crimes (1828).

reports often used such phrases as “great excitement,” the “wild fire” of emotions, and “highly incensed people,” which was meant to evoke stories about the revolution when

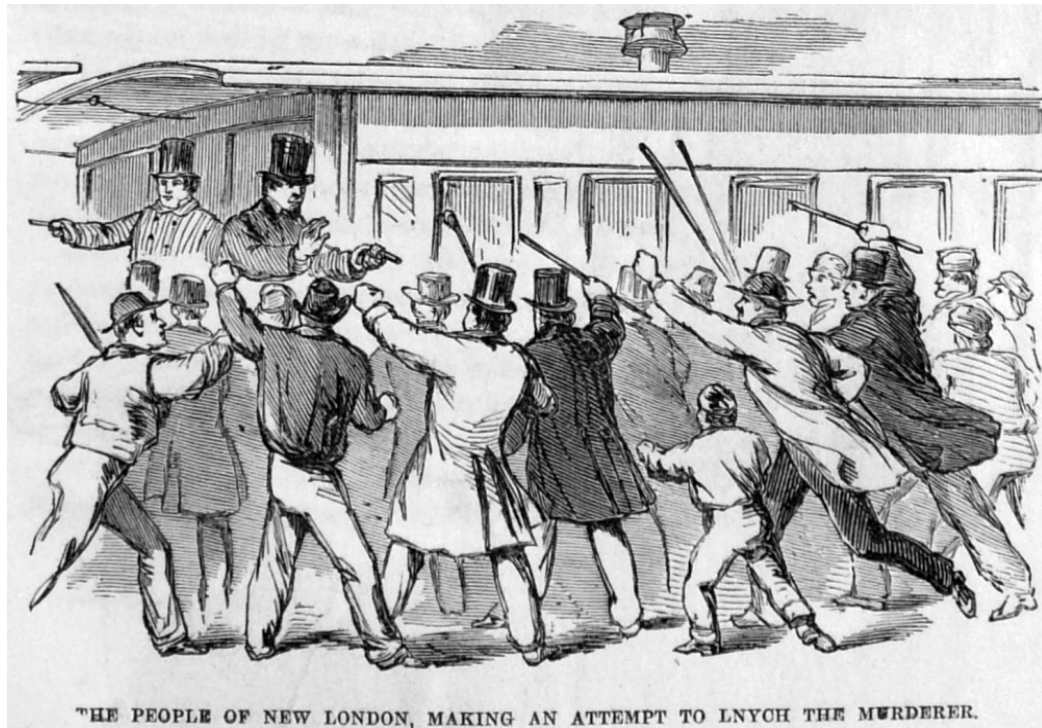


Figure 3.11: Some nineteenth-century images were meant to convey lynchers' good intentions (1860).

patriotic Americans were compelled to take justice into their hands.

What many people wondered, of course, was whether it was appropriate to view lynchings as a democratic form of justice—and whether the concept of common sense was implicated in what was perceived, particularly from across the Atlantic, as an inherent violence of American democracy. The idea that lynching and democracy were somehow linked was detestable to many Americans who saw extralegal punishment rituals as perverse spectacles that distorted the country's republican principles. One American writer, infuriated by the fact that lynching was often justified in republican terms, simply called proponents of lynching

enemies of our revolution, and of its true spirit. . . . He is neither a patriot nor a philanthropist who would compare the destruction of the tea in the harbor of Boston with every abolition riot, or every resistance to our own

solemnly enacted laws, or every lynching mob that chooses to caricature the forms of justice. (“Editor’s Easy Chair”).

Opponents of lynchings wanted to dispel the notion that democratic principles led to the rise of extralegal punishment rituals by emphasizing lynchings’ sadistic overtones and corrupting effect. Images from *The American Anti-Slavery Almanac* offer some telling examples; some of them show lynchers smiling and taking pleasure in the crimes they commit (Fig. 3.12). Such images were meant to give the impression that lynching was not about justice; it was a crime perpetrated by sociopaths and people with no respect for law. Even the writers who defended vigilantism and lynching occasionally admitted that such rituals were troublesome on many levels. As Charles Summerfield pointed out in *Illustrated Lives and Adventures of the Desperadoes of the New World: Containing an Account of the Different Modes of Lynching, the Cane Hill Murder, the Victims, the Execution, the Justification, etc.* (1859), popular tribunals and lynchings were necessary in certain circumstances,

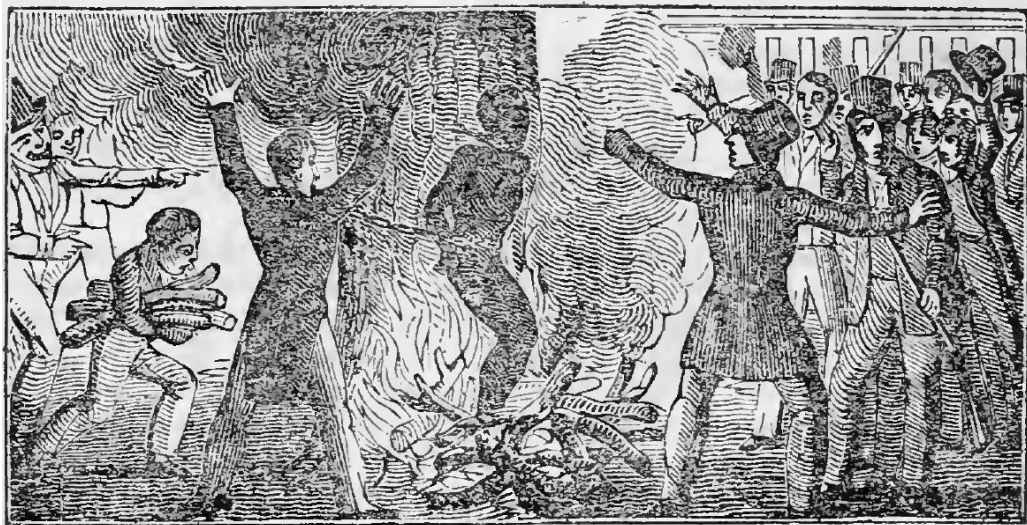


Figure 3.12: Sadistic overtones of lynching (1839).

particularly on the frontier, but their effectiveness was questionable. He admitted that lynchings tended to be so horrific that they traumatized the public instead of creating the impression that justice was accomplished.

After one *hanging*, or *burning*, or even a case of extreme whipping and torture, there always occurs, in a short time, a revulsion in the public feeling, a mournful, half-suppressed sentiment of sorrow for the victims; a sad, sickening regret, as if the memory of a murder were haunting the conscience of the people. (17)

In some cases, another reporter wrote, the crimes perpetrated by lynch mobs were “blacker and baser than can be found in the whole course of their victim’s life” (*Life and Adventures of Smith Maythe* 48).

Ultimately, it is important to recognize that the significance of this issue was not limited to a handful of ethical and legal questions; it reflected the volatility of the young American democracy and Americans’ uncertainty about their country’s fate. Americans’ desire to assert the democratic principles upon which their country was founded was invariable dampened by fears antinomianism. As one observer wrote in 1839, the proliferation of lynchings reflected what he called “a wild spirit of insubordination” in the young republic in which people considered disregard for law a political virtue.

laws appear to be made only to be disregarded: and when disregarded and broken, when riots take place, when mobs destroy buildings and commit murders, not only these outrages passed by with a slight comment by the public press, but there also arise those who are deemed respectable in the community, who defend and excuse these infractions of the law of God and man, and who would fain make us believe that lynching is proper in *some cases*, while they leave it with the mob to decide when such cases occur . . . . The conquest of Texas, the attempted conquest of Canada, are

glaring instances of our contempt of the law of the land, and laws of nations. The murders by slow fires, and the hangings, in the Southern States; and the destroying of convents and halls of debate, and the mobbing of abolitionists, in the Northern States, are instances of the development of this disorganizing spirit among the mass of the people. (“Lynch-Law, and Nullification”)

What was particularly disturbing about this trend was its pervasiveness. As this writer pointed out, it was not limited to one group but shared by writers and reformers of all kinds—abolitionists, anti-abolitionists, reformers with anarchical leniencies, and their detractors—all of them eagerly distorted democratic ideals and exploited the moral and legal contradictions of execution rituals for their goals. In that environment, the scaffold acquired a larger symbolic meaning than before. It ceased to be a site where the authorities could reassert the legitimacy of religious and social precepts. It became an object of contention over a wide array of issues—not only over the question about benefits and dangers of public punishments but also such fundamental concepts as democracy and law.

#### DEBATES ABOUT THE BENEFITS AND DANGERS OF PUBLIC PUNISHMENT RITUALS

In the last section of this chapter, I would like to reiterate two important points. First, the subject of punishment was exceedingly contentious; there was no consensus about proper methods and role of punishment in the United States (not now and not in the past). Second, the contentiousness of this issue contributed to the rise of Americans’ interest in crime and crime literature.

In his influential study *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault pointed out that the nineteenth century saw a significant decrease in the frequency of public punishments

in Western Europe and North America.<sup>40</sup> What is important to add here is that this subject did not disappear from discussions—in fact it became more contentious than ever. It is true, as Foucault argued, that punishments were increasingly often hidden within prison walls, away from the public view. At the same time punishments became more visible than ever, because they migrated from the public square onto the pages of newspapers, pamphlets, and cheap novels. For the general public, the execution ritual ceased to be primarily a spectacle but became a purely rhetorical construct—and an object of contention.

Debates about public punishments took place on several levels. In their most basic form, such debates directly raised a number of pertinent questions. Were capital punishments effective? Was it ethically appropriate to use them for didactic purposes? On this level, such debates were fairly well-defined in that they focused only on the subject of punishment. What complicated the picture, however, was that more often than not the questions about punishment rituals were evoked in the contexts of other arguments that dealt with far more complex and far-reaching issues.

The opposition to the public executions developed in the second half of the eighteenth century, at the height of the Enlightenment. It was based on the notion that public punishments were unhelpful in preventing crime and had a notably negative impact on their spectators. Several respectable figures of the period, including Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Diderot, expressed their doubts about effectiveness and ethical dimensions of capital punishments, thus laying the groundwork for future debates about this subject. Particularly influential work in this respect was Cesare Beccaria's *Of Crime and Punishment* (1764, *Dei delitti e delle pene*). It made a

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<sup>40</sup> The basic premise of Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish* is that in the course of the nineteenth century the organization of punishment in the Western countries underwent some significant changes. Most noticeable was "the disappearance of punishment as a spectacle" and its nearly complete removal from the public view (8).

substantial impact on such important American writers and politicians as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Thomas Paine. His argument against capital punishment, which many of his contemporaries in Europe and America found compelling, reflected humanistic trends of the Enlightenment; he was convinced that the only goal of punishment should be “to prevent the criminal from doing further injury to society, and to prevent others from committing the like offence” (42). He argued that capital punishment should be abolished for two main reasons. It was a violation of basic human rights: “the punishment of death is not authorized by any right.” What is more, capital punishments were ineffective in preventing other crimes. Beccaria even argued that they promoted barbarity and stimulated criminal behavior. The ritual in itself, he added, was nothing more than a sensationalist show that offered the viewers a “terrible but momentary spectacle” (“delightful spectacle to a fanatic multitude”) while failing to make a meaningful impact of their conscience (105).

By emphasizing the negative effect of punishment rituals on the public, Beccaria essentially condemned the tradition of exploiting such rituals for didactic purposes. In this respect, his argument was echoed by many American reformers and journalists who drew their readers’ attention to the corrupting influence of execution ceremonies. One American writer, who witnessed John Johnson’s execution in New York in 1824, commented that

The morals of those people [who insist on watching executions] must be bad, and their minds uneducated, who can delight in the horrible spectacle of taking away the life of a fellow creature. The very feeling, that leads people to public executions, is brutal, is savage in the extreme. It is the same sort of feeling, or aiming to that, which actuates the mob in pulling down and burning houses, and Lynching their inmates. It indicates, perhaps, still greater depravity of feeling: for the mob may act

from the impulse of the moment, while those who delight in the dreadful spectacle of an execution, will deliberately travel twenty, fifty, or a hundred miles, rather than miss the pleasure of seeing one . . . .

What a place for hardening the hearts, and demoralizing those who are not already gone in depravity, vice, and crime. (“Private Executions”)

As American reformers adopted Beccaria’s strategy of exposing the negative impact of executions, they expanded it to address various political and social issues in their country. With the rise of the revolutionary sentiment in the late eighteenth century, for example, some writers used the subject of capital punishment to promote their republican ideology. Thomas Paine’s condemnation of public executions in *The Rights of Man* (1791) reflected his radical republicanism; he attacked monarchical governments by criticizing their ways of exploiting punishment ceremonies. The brutality of such rituals was meant to be associated with the corruption of monarchical systems:

In England the punishment in certain cases is by hanging, drawing and quartering; the heart of the sufferer is cut out and held up to the view of the populace. In France, under the former Government, the punishments were not less barbarous. Who does not remember the execution of Damien, torn to pieces by horses? The effect of those cruel spectacles exhibited to the populace is to destroy tenderness or excite revenge; and by the base and false idea of governing men by terror, instead of reason, they become precedents. It is over the lowest class of mankind that government by terror is intended to operate, and it is on them that it operates to the worst effect. They have sense enough to feel they are the objects aimed at; and they inflict in their turn the examples of terror they have been instructed to practice. (213)

A number of other American writers in the young republic, including Benjamin Rush, followed the same strategy by arguing that exuberant execution rituals were associated with undemocratic forms of government.<sup>41</sup>

Opponents of capital punishment in the United States did not succeed in completely abolishing it, but their efforts did contribute to gradual eradication of public execution rituals. What was, of course, ironic about this process was that the decline of public executions was overcompensated by the abundance of sensationalist reports and images in print. To extend this point even further—it was ironic that even reform literature that battled public displays of cruelty often resorted to publishing the most exuberant and shocking accounts of punishment ceremonies.

That irony could not escape Americans at the time. While many reformers sought to abolish public executions (or abolish capital punishment altogether), they thought it was necessary to incorporate descriptions of execution rituals in their publications for moralistic purposes (to underscore their cruelty, for example). A considerable number of such publications included intentionally disturbing images of executions, tortured slaves,

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<sup>41</sup> Benjamin Rush made a similar argument in *Considerations on the Injustice and Impolicy* (1792): “Capital punishments are the natural offspring of monarchical governments. Kings believe that they possess their crowns by a divine right; no wonder, therefore, they assume the divine power of taking away human life. Kings consider their subjects their property; no wonder therefore, they shed their blood with as little emotion as men shed the blood of their sheep and cattle. But the principles of republican governments speak a very different language. They teach the absurdity of the divine origin of kingly power. They appreciate human life, and increase public and private obligations to preserve it. They consider human sacrifices as no less offensive to the sovereignty of the people, than they are to the majesty of heaven. The United States have adopted these peaceful and benevolent forms of government. It becomes them therefore to adopt their mild and benevolent principles. An execution in a republic is like a human sacrifice in religion” (Masur 18-9). The tradition of accusing monarchical governments of indulgence public execution spectacles became quite common in the United States (which sounds strange today). One telling passage comes from an 1843 article: “Monarchies, and all oppressive forms of government—in addition to their natural instinct of all conservatism—cling with a peculiar affection to the Death Punishment, for the obvious reason that they can never venture to make the use of it they always apprehend as possibility desirable for political offenses, when it has been abolished for all others” (“Capital Punishment, The Argument of Rev. George B. Cheever,” *Democratic Review*. 12.58 April 1843: 409-24).

and exceptionally cruel forms of corporal punishment. The *Libertine* report of William Young's [Wilhelm Jung's] execution in 1842, for example, intentionally absorbed some unbearably revolting details to shock its readers:

The wind-wipe was entirely severed—the blood flowed copiously from his throat and mouth staining his white neckerchief and cap –and the wind rushed through the bleeding opening with a frightful, most unearthly loud report, which caused every spectator in the yard to shudder and turn away his face in horror. His legs and his arms—though firmly tied behind his back—writhed about for at least ten minutes. . . . It was the most revolting spectacle that we ever saw or ever read of. (“An Awful Scene”)

Anti-slavery publications in the United States and Britain also relied on provocative descriptions of punishments to shock their readers. *American Anti-Slavery Almanac* routinely included intentionally horrific images of punishments inflicted on slaves (Fig. 3.12). The press regularly published deliberately provocative images of maimed slaves, like the famous photograph by McPherson & Oliver, to raise awareness about the issue of slavery (Fig 3.13). This technique can also be observed in a wide range of popular works, including the narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglas.

One of the most provocative abolitionist works of the antebellum period was Theodore Dwight Weld's *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839). A brutally descriptive work, it included hundreds of revealing and shocking accounts of slaves' mistreatment, including cruel punishments inflicted on them. It describes people being whipped till they “rained blood” and their “*every joint showed distinctly* in its crevices.” It mentions slaves who were roasted, devoured by bloodhounds, and clubbed to death. The book was meant to be shocking to the point of being repulsive. To emphasize the horror of these scenes, the contributing writers even

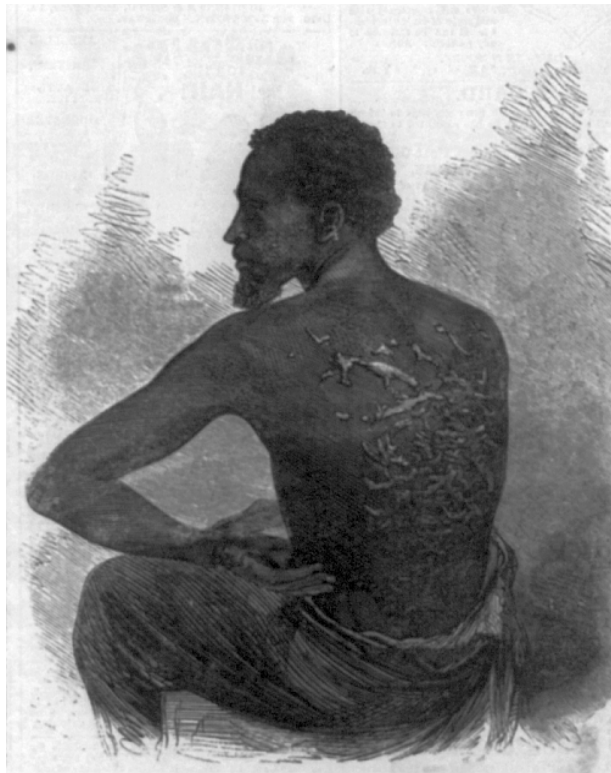


Figure 3.13: A Slave with permanent lash marks.

claimed that they could not even look at such tortures: “A negro was tied up, and flogged until the blood ran down and filled his shoes, so that when he raised either foot and set it down again, the blood would run over their tops. I could not look on any longer, but turned away in horror” (69).

Editors of such publications saw their sensationalist strategy of bringing such horrific images

to the public’s attention as an essential tool in their reform efforts. Since the punishments they described were generally conducted in private, they claimed that it was their duty to show such cruel punishments in hope of rousing the public to join their crusade. The strategy of relying on such sensationalist images was obviously effective but somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, many reformers complained about the negative effect of execution rituals on the public. On the other hand, those reformers adopted the sensationalist strategy of manipulating their readers’ emotions for specific purposes and in prescribed ritualistic form. In this respect, their approach was in essence not much different from the one used by Puritan ministers in the seventeenth century. They used punishment rituals (and shocking images) for didactic purposes.

Historian Karen Halttunen, in her essay “Humanitarianism and the

Pornography,” explained ethical contradictions of reformers’ reliance on sensationalist rhetoric in the following terms:

Humanitarian reformers were caught in a contradiction largely of their own making. To arouse popular opposition to the evil practices they sought to eradicate, they deemed it necessary to display those practices in all their horror . . . . But, by their own line of argument, viewing the spectacle of suffering could inflict terrible moral damage on the spectator, turning him or her into a ‘savage’ with an ‘atrocious passion’ for cruelty.  
(330)

This contradiction is unavoidable but rarely acknowledged. It can be related to some unsettling ethical questions in contemporary journalism. Under the pretense of good intentions, journalists and reformers often insists on exposing awful examples of human rights abuses, crime, military conflicts, and torture. But we rarely raise the question whether such reports cultivate readers’ addiction to titillating images. Halttunen even went so far as to raise the question whether “the reformers’ own sensibilities had been blunted or, worse, that their spectatorship had generated in them a positive taste for cruelty?” (325-6).

What is rarely acknowledged in scholarly discussions of reform literature is that reformers often embraced ethically dubious forms of sensationalism; their strategy can be characterized as methodical application of emotional pain on the audience. Descriptions of tortures and gruesome punishments in reform literature were designed to manipulate readers’ emotional response. Reform writers exposed their readers to shocking images and testimonies in a prescribed manner in hope of evoking a desired reaction. It could be accomplished, for example, by forcing readers to relate to the experience of the tortured. We can even make some parallels between the experience of reading sensationalist reform literature and some methods of inflicting pain (particularly



Figure 3.14: Branding a slave (1857).

branding) in that both used pain to evoke a desired reaction.

Graphic depictions of cruelty in reform literature were meant to conflate physical experience of pain and the emotional experience of reading about them (Fig. 3.14). It certainly does not mean that readers' experiences were identical to those who were physically tortured: the former were subjected to emotional pain whereas the latter were forced to endure inescapable emotional and physical pain. No matter how long we stare at an image of some horrendous punishment, we can never experience the physical pain and the sense of entrapment felt by the one who is depicted in that image. But what is remarkable is that reformers learned how to exploit their readers' awareness of that difference. As the reader looks at an image of a horrendous punishment, it is meant to awaken his empathy and then to exacerbate his emotional pain by making him realize that his pain is nowhere close to what the tortured person experienced.

What this strategy involved was, in Halttunen words, "instruct[ing] readers in the

appropriate response to pain” (330). The readers of such publications were not only expected to react to provocative images with dismay but even told exactly how to feel once they finish reading. Harriet Jacobs, in her well-known narrative, makes it clear from the start that her book was written specifically “to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts” and “to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse” (47, 6). The introduction of *American Slavery as It Is* is even more direct. The reader was “empannelled as a juror to try a plain case and bring in an honest verdict” based on his “common sense, a conscience, and a human heart.” No one, in other words, was meant to be immune from the provocative accounts of cruelty. The truth was painfully simple: “Whoever denies this, his lips libel his heart” and “[h]is heart is false to human nature” (7).

From a rhetorical point of view, such publications created a new ritual of responding to sensationalist images—a ritual of disciplining readers’ reactions and interpretive strategies. On a very basic structural level, almost nothing changed between the seventeenth- and nineteenth-century rituals; they still demanded the unanimity of audiences’ response to provocative images. Punishment rituals remained carefully orchestrated events which were designed to force the public to acquiesce to the expectations which were projected unto it. The only thing that changed was the nature of expectations. In Puritan rituals, a spectator was expected to affirm his allegiance to the dominant religious doctrines and accept the notion that he was almost as sinful as the doomed criminal. In the nineteenth century, when religious concerns were overshadowed with civic ones, witnesses of punishment rituals and readers of punishment reports were meant to behave in ways that reflected new political ideals: democracy, republicanism, common sense. It is true that in the increasingly diverse environment of the new republic it might have seemed that one had more freedom in

terms of expressing his reaction to various scenes of punishment, but that freedom was ultimately scripted in terms of new expectations. One *had to* be indignant when one was expected to be indignant. One *had to* express his discontent the right way for fear of being ostracized. Spectators of public executions in the nineteenth century did not stand in orderly rows, like their Puritan predecessors, but they still behaved in the ways expected of them.

## CHAPTER IV

### SEX SCANDALS IN EARLY AMERICA

“Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.”

Luke 12:2

“The precept and practice of the Bible require the detection, exposure, and punishment of licentiousness.”

*Christian Watchman*

September 5 1834

“Why are the misters of the gospel so prone to licentiousness? Because they are a set of hypocritical libertines.”

George Thompson

*City Crimes*, 1850

**Précis:** The New England authorities exploited sex crimes for didactic purposes the same way they exploited any other crimes; they punished transgressors in carefully orchestrated public rituals that reasserted established norms. With the proliferation of publishing, such methods of didactic sensationalism developed into an enduring literary tradition the influence of which could be felt well into the nineteenth century. This chapter traces the development of that tradition while emphasizing that such a controversial subject as sexual impropriety, even when exploited for ostensibly legitimate purposes, often led to uncontrollable scandalous situations. It happened because the authorities' methods of exploiting sex scandals gradually came under the intense scrutiny of journalists, popular writers, and reformers. This trend was particularly apparent in that the public grew fascinated with sex scandals involving the clergy and powerful figures.

## SEX CRIMES AND DIDACTIC SENSATIONALISM: NAKEDNESS AS A MORAL GESTURE

What the American Puritans thought about sex is a subject of intense disagreements. In popular imagination, even in the seventeenth century, the Puritans acquired the image of ascetic killjoys who entirely avoided thinking about sex. The character of Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, whose name literally means "bad will," is a good example of how the Puritans were perceived at the time; Malvolio is an uptight man with absolutely no patience for other people's amorous inclinations. Nathaniel Hawthorne was also guilty of perpetrating a similar image of the Puritans in American literature. Such works as *The Scarlet Letter* and "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" describe seventeenth-century New England as a dismal place run by "the grizzly saints" who did not tolerate any sign of sensuality. In this respect, we can agree with Kathleen Verduin's conclusion that the American Puritans were somewhat backward about sexual matters: "New England ministers . . . linked sexuality with deeper, indeed fundamental, threats: atheism, paganism, and apocalyptic judgment" (223).

But the Puritans were not as ignorant about sex as many of us prefer to imagine them. If we turn to the studies of such scholars as Henry Bamford Parkes, Edmund S. Morgan, and Roland Mushat Frye, we will find plenty of evidence that the Puritans were fairly open-minded about sex; as Morgan argued, "The Puritans were not ascetics; they never wished to prevent the enjoyment of earthly delights," as long as they did not interfere with religion and violate common sense of decency (594).<sup>42</sup> How did it happen,

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<sup>42</sup> The debate about the American Puritans' attitude toward sex has a history of its own. Henry Bamford Parkes made one of the first attempts to dispel some misconceptions about this subject in "Morals and Law Enforcement in Colonial New England" (*New England Quarterly*, V [1932]: 431-52). Other notable studies include Edmund S. Morgan's "The Puritans and Sex" (*The New England Quarterly* 15.4 [1942]: 591-607) and Roland Mushat Frye's "The Teachings of Classical Puritanism on Conjugal Love" (*Studies in Renaissance* 2 [1955]: 148-59), which emphasized that the Puritan view of sex was not as negative as scholars generally tended to believe. The January 2003 issue of *The William and Mary*

then, that the Puritans grew to be perceived as ascetics? As we will see in this chapter, it was actually their own fault; their open-mindedness about sexual matters was overshadowed by their habit of dramatizing and exploiting sex scandals in print in order to promote their agenda. The Puritan authorities did it according to the basic principles of didactic sensationalism, the notion that scandalous situations could be used for educational purposes.

To recall William Bradford's argument about the proliferation of crime in the colonies, New Englanders were so eager to punish criminal behavior that they gladly exposed all kinds of scandalous crimes. Each manifestation of vice had to be "brought into the light, and set in the plaine field, or rather on a hill, [and] made conspicuous to the view of all" (386, spelling modernized). The colony, after all, was thought to be a grand religious experiment for the benefit of the entire Christendom. For this reason, colonists were held to a high standard. What the authorities hoped to accomplish by prosecuting crimes in public was to reinforce colonists' religious zeal and encourage others to do the same. Sex crimes made no exception to this rule. Bradford even went so far as to say that cases of sodomy, buggery and other "things fearful to name" could actually be "marveled at" as cautionary tales of depravity. He was convinced that nothing worked better to "cause us to fear and tremble at the consideration of our corrupt natures" than scandalous revelations (385, spelling modernized). This idea was shared by many of his contemporaries, who believed that prosecution of sex crimes could be turned into effective educational spectacles. With time, this strategy inspired a strange form of sensationalist moralizing that not only relied on sexual metaphors but could actually be expressed only through scandalous subjects.

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*Quarterly* includes more recent essays that capture the complexity and diversity of attitudes toward sexuality in Early America.

The Puritan rhetoric was steeped in sexual metaphors. Their use can be traced back to the rhetorical excesses of the first Protestants. We can recall, for example, Martin Luther's choice of words when he railed about "that blood-thirsty, unclean, blasphemous, whore of the devil."<sup>43</sup> Early Protestant writers were fond of sexual metaphors, particularly when they attacked Catholics whose alleged heresies were routinely described in terms of sexual perversity. The American Puritans developed this approach even further. They believed that their efforts to purify the church could be more successful if they exposed every sexual transgression, regardless of whether it was committed by their fellow Puritans or their religious enemies. In this respect, indecent public exposure was a perfect metaphor of the strategy American Puritans used. They demanded everyone to confront one's sinful nature and encouraged people to expose their sins. They perfected public rituals in which deviant crimes were "marveled at" as vivid examples of human predisposition to sinfulness.

What is striking about New England court records from the seventeenth century is not so much the frequency of sexual misdemeanors but the unchanging custom of exploiting them in public spectacles and sermons. Numerous cases of adultery, homosexuality, masturbation, interracial sex, and bestiality, which the *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth* and John Winthrop's chronicles diligently listed along daily transactions, had one thing in common. No matter what the circumstances were, all sexual transgressions were made a public matter and turned into instructional spectacles.

Adultery and fornication were thought to be the most common and contagious forms of sexual impropriety. Colonial leaders had their reasons to be concerned that

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<sup>43</sup> The passage, in which Luther attacked "hanc cruentam, blasphemam et sacrilegam meretricem diaboli," is mentioned in the preface to Robert Barnes' *Vitae Pontificum Romanorum Quos Papae Vocamus* (1536). It is quoted here from M.V. Hay's *The Chain of Error in Scottish History* (New York, 1927: 2).

such crimes could easily get out of hand. In demographic terms, New England was a highly volatile place. There were far more men than women in colonies. We should also remember that the natives' presence near settlements could tempt some colonists to have inappropriate relationships with Indians. Overall, there was plenty of evidence that colonists engaged in illicit sexual affairs. *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth* mentions several cases of marriages which were hastily arranged because of unwanted pregnancies. Those who were implicated in such cases were publicly whipped for having sex before marriage (*Records of the Colony of New Plymouth* 1.12; 1.132; 2.85). On one occasion the authorities uncovered a rather convoluted affair involving at least five people who engaged in incest, fornication, and homosexuality:

Lydia Hatch, for suffering Edward Michell to attempt to abuse her body vncleanesse, & did not discover it, & lying in the same bed w<sup>th</sup> her brother Jonathan, is censured to be publicly wipt; was accordingly donn.

Edward Michell, for his lude and sodomitically practices tending to sodomye w<sup>th</sup> Edward Preston, and other lude carryages w<sup>th</sup> Lydia Hatch, is censured to be presently wipt at Plymouth, at the public place, and once more at Barnstable . . .

Edward Preston, for his lude practices tending to sodomye w<sup>th</sup> Edwards Michell, and pressing John Keene therevnto (if he would haue yielded,) is also censured to be forthw<sup>th</sup> wipt at Plym[outh] . . .

John Keene, because he resisted temptacon, & vsed meanes to discover it, is appoynted to stand by whilst Michell and Preston are wipt, though in some thing he was faulty. (*Records of the Colony of New Plymouth* 2.35-6)

Other sexual transgressions mentioned in the *Records* include John Bundy's lewd behavior towards Elizabeth Haybell (1.66), Ephraim Kempton's "vnckleane speeches &

carriages” (2.54), and Nicholas Sympkins’s “attempting to lye with an Indian woman” (2.4).

The authorities clearly wanted to minimize the frequency of sex crimes—but if such crimes were uncovered, they were eagerly prosecuted in public to discourage other cases of this kind. Culprits could end up branded, whipped, and even executed. As John Winthrop commented in the aftermath of Mary Lathan’s execution for adultery in 1643, her death “gave good exhortation to all young maids to be obedient to their parents” (*History of New England* 2.191). The custom of ornamenting transgressors with marks of shame also suggests that their crimes were meant to be turned into public spectacles. Some culprits were forced to wear distinct signs, similar to the one described in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. The *Records* mention a short affair of Thomas Bray, a single man, and Anne Linceford, a married woman, which ended with a public whipping and the court order to have them wear the letters AD (for “adultery”) on their upper garments (2.28). Another woman, who was “using dalliance diuers tymes w<sup>th</sup> Tinsin, an Indian,” was also forced to wear a distinct mark of shame (1.132). In some cases, culprits were not only whipped but also had their faces branded with hot iron. In 1637, “John Allexander & Thomas Roberts were . . . found guilty of leud behaviour and unclean carriage one w<sup>th</sup> another, by often spendinge their seede one vpon another . . . . The said Allexander was therefore censured by the court to be seuerely wipt, and burn in the shoulder w<sup>th</sup> a hot iron” (1.64). Such marks of shame reinforced the authorities’ prestige for their vigilance and served as constant reminders that sexual transgressions threatened the Puritan experiment.

Cases of bestiality, unequivocally condemned by the Bible, generated even more elaborate responses than any other sexual transgressions. Winthrop mentions one of the earliest cases of bestiality that took place in the late 1640—a “wicked fellow” who was so “given up to that abomination that he never saw any beast go before him but he lusted

after it” (2.26). The unnamed pervert, to Winthrop’s chagrin, escaped to Long Island where he drowned, thus depriving the authorities of a chance to turn his execution into a lesson. On other occasions, they were more successful. Young William Hatchet was hanged in December of 1641 for bugging a cow. In 1647 Connecticut executed the seventeen-year-old John Nubery. Other cases followed. Judging by the alarmist tone of some records, they gave the impression that bestiality was becoming an epidemic.

A particularly well-recorded event of this sort was the execution of the seventeen-year-old Thomas Granger in 1642. It offers a good example of how the authorities exploited such crimes. Granger was apprehended, as Bradford meticulously recorded, for satisfying his urges with “a mare, a cow, two goats, five sheep, 2 calves, and a turkey” (397). Skipping some “particulars,” Bradford looked into the causes of this crime. He pointed out, with some relief, that Granger’s proclivity was not home grown. The young man apparently picked up the habit “in old England” where “he was taught it by an other.” What worried Bradford, however, was that such a pernicious foreign import was contagious. If “many wicked persons and profane people should so quickly come over into this land” and “one wicked person may infecte many,” then the colony could certainly descend into the moral abyss colonists so feared (398). What was necessary, therefore, was to expose this event in ways that would prevent proliferation of such crimes. Granger’s trial and execution were expectedly turned into a lengthy instructional spectacle. According to the law stated in the Book of Leviticus, the entire live-stock which Granger put to use in such a shameful manner was slain in front of his eyes. Then Granger himself was put to death amidst some mournful recitation about the evils of

bestiality. "A very sad spectacle that was," Bradford wrote. "Horrible it is to mention, but the truth of the historie requires it" (397).<sup>44</sup>

The last execution for bestiality in the seventeenth century took place in 1674. It proved to be the most exemplary case of Puritan sensationalism in that period. It was an amazingly provocative story right from the start. As if parodying Bradford's notion that crimes should be "made conspicuous to the view of all," the seventeen-year-old Benjamin Goad mounted a mare right in an open field, in broad daylight. It was a sight unseen, with the culprit's daring unmatched ever since. Goad was, naturally, quickly apprehended, tried, and eventually hanged in a well-attended ceremony. Samuel Danforth, by then an accomplished religious figure, delivered a lengthy sermon about the evils of bestiality. But what made this episode even more remarkable was that it did not end with the execution; Danforth went on to publish his sermon, thus inaugurating a new trend in American sensationalism. From then on, scandalous crimes could be "marveled at" not only by the people who attended executions but by the entire colony, even by the readers on the other side of the Atlantic.

The authorities' methods of exposing sex crimes inspired an enduring tradition of didactic sensationalism in New England. American readers grew quickly accustomed to cheap and readily available publications, in which sex crimes were commonly exploited according to the established didactic conventions. Such publications used sex crimes as catalysts for discussions of various religious, social, and political issues. Even as late as the nineteenth century, which saw the rise of new forms of sensationalism, popular writers who turned to the subject of sex often felt compelled to preserve some essential conventions of early American didacticism. But this certainly does not mean that those didactic conventions were left unchallenged. As we will see in the rest of this

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<sup>44</sup> For a more extensive study of bestiality in that period, see John M. Murrin's "Things Fearful to Name': Bestiality in Colonial America" (*Pennsylvania History* 65 [1998]: 8-43), in which the author discusses several other cases left unmentioned here.

chapter, the established methods of exploiting sex scandals gradually came under the scrutiny of journalists, popular writers, and reformers, who experimented with new ways of writing about sex scandals. One particularly notable manifestation of this trend was that American writers grew fascinated with sex scandals involving powerful religious and political figures.

#### “DAVID’S SIN”: SEX CRIMES OF CLERGYMEN AND POLITICIANS

Scores of American politicians have been accused of sexual improprieties which were intensely exploited in press by their opponents. Jefferson’s affair with his slave Sally Hemings, which became known during his presidency, is only one of many political sex scandals in the early Republic. Other cases involved such prominent American politicians as Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, John Quincy Adams, John Eaton, and Andrew Jackson. One contemporary cartoon depicts President Jackson and his entire cabinet lasciviously admire a performance of the French dancer Madame Céline Céleste in the White House, as if to suggest that all politicians were prone to indecency (Fig. 4.1).

The rise of sex scandals involving religious figures was even more dramatic. When in 1841 one judge faced the task of conducting a trial of a clergyman who was accused of raping his parishioner, he expressed a concern that would have surprised many of his predecessors. Could he fill the jury box with unprejudiced men who did not automatically assume that *all* clergymen were seducers? His concern was legitimate. By his day, quite many Americans grew to believe that religion was merely “a fabric and its professors hypocrites” (*Trial of Rev. Washington Van Zandt* 3).

A clergyman on trial is not a novelty today nor was it two hundred years ago when the country was flooded with news of crimes involving religious figures and respectable politicians. For decades before the “Great Sensation” of the Beecher-Tilton-

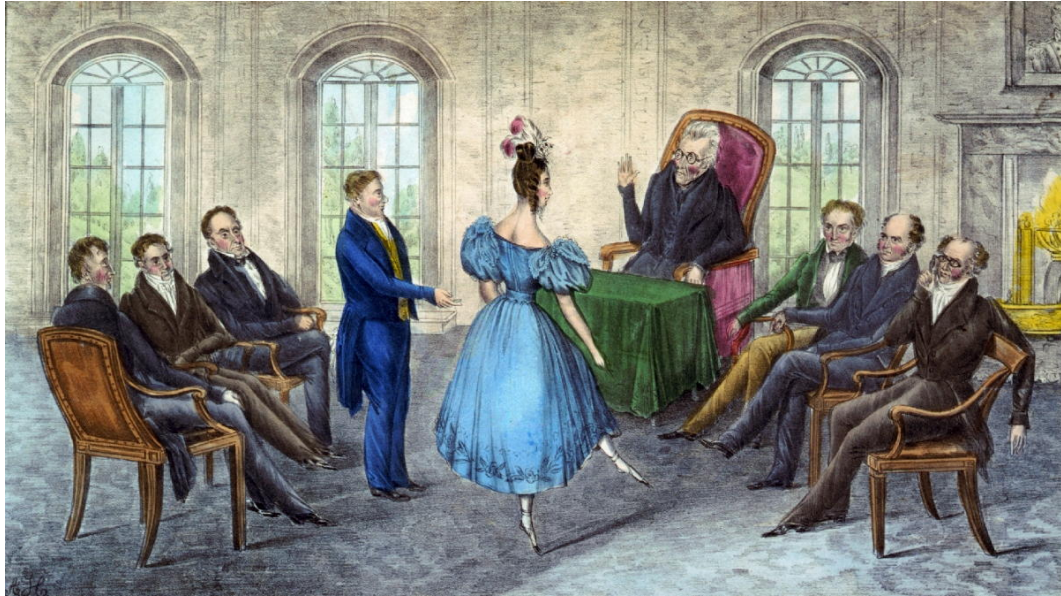


Figure 4.1: President Jackson and his Cabinet watch Céline Céleste perform at the White House (1836).

Woodhull scandal in the 1870s, one of the most closely covered scandals of the century, scores of ministers were accused and tried for crimes that run the entire spectrum of the criminal code: brutality, seduction, adultery, homosexuality, financial machinations, theft, murder, and heresy. The trials took place so often, and in so many parts of the country, that it seemed that one scandal metamorphosed into another. Their records, promptly printed, vented sensationalist news throughout all the states, thus giving the impression that the entire country was engulfed in an epidemic of sex crimes. In that culture, the news of a clergyman on trial ceased to be an exception and became a recognizable archetype in the American press.

What should be pointed out, however, is that this phenomenon was not a spontaneous outbreak of meaningless sensationalism. It is true that this subject was, to a large extent, popular simply because of its sensational character. But on the larger scale the public's fascination with politicians' and clergymen's sexual transgressions could be

seen as a literary revolution against the authorities' traditional monopoly on exploiting sex scandals for didactic purposes. By scrutinizing the lives of clergymen and politicians, journalists and popular writers appropriated and challenged the established methods of treating sex scandals. In this respect, the growing mistrust of public figures in the United States reflected the public's increasing antipathy toward the didactic formalism of early American sensationalism.

The tradition of implicating leaders in sex scandals is fairly old; the Bible offers a few well-known examples that gave rise to two basic models of exploiting sex crimes in print. The first model can be exemplified with the case of King David, a legendary figure who was chosen by God to rule over Israelites. Even though his reign was considered the golden age of Israel, King David's achievements were ultimately eclipsed by the revelations of his corruption and lechery. At the height of his glory, he committed adultery with his general's wife, which led to a devastating political turmoil. This story exemplifies the strategy that would be commonly used in reports about sex scandals involving powerful figures, the so-called "David's sin." They achieve their effect by creating a sharp contrast between leaders' accomplishments and their depravity. Scandalous reports of this sort often start by stressing a person's greatness before suddenly revealing the extent of his depravity.

The Bible also introduced another model of exploiting—or rather evoking—sex scandals. Its proponents use provocative sexual imagery to expose political and religious problems. This strategy is apparent in the works of the prophets, particularly Hosea and Ezekiel, who sought to condemn their countries' inequities by using intentionally indecent metaphors. Ezekiel, who was dismayed by Israel's toleration of foreigners and their religions within its borders, compared Israel to a young woman who forsook God's sincere love and became a whore (Ez 16:8-15). Hosea's prophesy was even more direct and violent. God's displeasure with Israel, which the prophet also compared to a whore,

is expressed in rather indecent terms. He promised to “strip her naked / and expose her as in the day she was born” (Hosea 2:3). He vowed to “uncover her shame / in the sight of her lovers” (2:10).<sup>45</sup> This strategy of misusing sexual imagery—or using sexual infidelity as a metaphor—in discussions of social and political issues created an enduring rhetorical tradition. It essentially allowed writers to turn any issue into a sex scandal of great magnitude.

The American Puritans, like other Protestants, were adept at using both of these strategies. They repeatedly used sex scandals or evoked sexual imagery to discredit their religious opponents. No one can forget the vehemence of early Protestant attacks on Catholic clergy, who were often portrayed as sexually and morally corrupt hypocrites whose perversions distorted their religious views. Eventually, Protestant writers did not shun exploiting sex scandals that allegedly involved their fellow Protestants. The case of the Antinomian Controversy (1635-7), which was discussed in Chapter I, is quite telling; the authorities’ campaign to discredit Anne Hutchinson, a religious leader of sorts, relied on accusing her of sexual impropriety. She was dubbed “American Jesabel,” a Biblical symbol of idolatry and lasciviousness. Two decades later, in the 1650s, the authorities used the same strategy against the Quakers, whose religious beliefs were widely regarded as a form of religious heresy and sexual promiscuity. Typical denunciations of Quakerism in the seventeenth century described its leaders as deviants and Quaker meetings as either dens of witchcraft, orgiastic parties, or both.<sup>46</sup> Caricatures of other

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<sup>45</sup> For an extensive discussion of this subject, see Sharon Moughtin’s *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Chapter I includes several detailed references to the works emphasizing the Quakers’ alleged sexual extravagance and deviancy. Some notable examples include Charles Leslie’s *Snake in the Grass* (1698), which insinuated that the Quakers promoted free love, Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), where we can find some provocative descriptions of Mary Ross, who was portrayed as a heretic seductress, and John Denham’s ballad “A Relation of a Quaker, That to the Shame of his Profession, Attempted to Bugger a Mare near Colchester” (London, 1653).



Figure 4.2: A contemporary cartoon satirizing Freemasons' alleged inclination toward sodomy and bestiality (1751).

denominations and societies, such as Freemasons and Mormons, routinely portrayed their adherents as sexual deviants. One exemplary cartoon, which appeared in 1751, exploited the belief that Freemasons were perverse by depicting a Freemason enjoying being sexually violated in a barn (Fig. 4.2).

While Puritan ministers were not particularly eager to expose their own sins, their foes readily targeted the Puritans' alleged sexual transgressions. In England, where Puritanism was regarded as a fanatical sect, stories of the Puritans' inequities sparked lively scandals and were quickly rushed into print, particularly during the Restoration, when Puritanism fell out of favor with the court. Thus the affair of Zachary Crofton, the Puritan divine who was caught flagellating his maidservant, was turned into Francis Kirkman's satire *The Presbyterian Lash, or Noctroff's Maid Whipt* (1661). The execution of Robert Faulkes in 1679, a Puritan minister who was condemned to death for

murdering his illegitimately sired baby, left a trail of sensationalist pamphlets. It is remarkable that the reports of such cases appeared in conjunction with news about other sensational crimes, which promoted the image of the Puritans as not only a heretical but also a criminal sect. Thus one account of a Presbyterian minister's trial for fornication appeared in the same pamphlet describing the rape case involving Sir Edward Moseley; it was entitled *The Tryal of Sir Edward Moseley . . . To which are Added, the Depositions against Mr. Clark, Pastor of a Presbyterian Congregation, at Lambeth, for Committing Fornication with the Widow Coleman* (1719). The records of yet another trial, which involved a Presbyterian minister who was executed for an assassination attempt, appeared in the sensationalist pamphlet with a provocative title *The Spirit of Fanaticism: Exemplify'd in the Tryals of Mr. James Mitchel . . . AND Major Thomas Weir (a Gifted Brother at the Knack of Extempore Prayer) who was Burnt . . . for Adultery, Beastiality with a Mare and a Cow, and Incest with his Own Sister* (1710). An even more striking example of this genre can be found in John Dunton's *Athenianism* (1710). It includes a provocative chapter titled "Secret Narrative of Four Dissenting Priests . . . Who Were Lately Silenc'd in their Congregations for Whoredom," in which the author unraveled cases of adultery, infanticide, and other horrific and scandalous crimes among the clergy. Faithful to the basic principles of didactic sensationalism, Dunton explained that it was everyone's responsibility "to detect [ministers'] abominable Lewdness" and expose "their *scandalous Whoredoms*" (220).<sup>47</sup>

In New England things seemed quieter—at least at first. With some exceptions, colonists were not accustomed to dramatic sex scandals of the kind Hawthorne described in *The Scarlet Letter*. I could identify only two scandals involving religious figures in colonial New England. In 1624 the Plymouth plantation expelled John Lyford because he

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<sup>47</sup> For an extensive survey of the seventeenth-century anti-Puritan literature in England, see the "Anti-Puritanical" chapter of Roger Thompson's *Unfit for Modest Ears* (Totowa, NJ, 1979).

did not share other colonists' religious views and, in addition, was implicated in some marital infidelities (Bradford 192-7). Another scandal broke out in the 1732 in Marblehead, when the minister named Ebenezer Knight confessed to "a long series of Uncleanness with Mankind" (Heyrman 286). Although such cases were rare, there were some signs that there was at least *some* awareness that religious leaders were prone to scandalous behavior. Among the scarce sources that can offer some insight into this subject are the confessional writings of Thomas Shepard (1605-1649), Michael Wigglesworth (1635-1705), and Joseph Moody (1700-1753).

Thomas Shepard, a prominent Puritan minister in early New England, confessed in his autobiography to many youthful indiscretions, including several homosexual encounters. He usually had them when he was drunk (Shepherd 21-2). Other ministers were more discreet about their proclivities. When Michael Wigglesworth found that he cannot dispel his homoerotic fantasies, he confessed it to no one except to his diary. A devout Puritan and a stern Harvard teacher, he felt what he described as "*unresistable torments of carnal lust*" in the presence of his young pupils. He persistently complained to his diary about his "*wicked heart*" and beseeched God to be freed from those torments. To Wigglesworth, the situation was hopeless. He was so "*exceedingly carried with love to [his] pupils*" that he forgot about his obligations to God (*The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* 11). He prayed. He masturbated. He even considered suicide, but ultimately decided to solve his sexual problems by getting married.

Joseph Moody, another deeply religious masturbator who served as a clergyman at York, Maine, kept his diary in coded and almost indecipherable Latin. He used it to make some trivial observations about the weather and his frequent sexual lapses. Here are two typical entries. August 2, 1723: "Warm. Sun hid by smoke. Shone not clear till p.m. Thunder at a Distance. Between school sessions I impiously, but in a manner against my will, defiled myself." July 6, 1724: "Not hot. Flying clouds. N.W. Breeze. Last

night, at first, I handled my member, planning as I thought, nothing evil. In the end, though, I defiled myself.” For Moody, there was nothing innocent about such episodes; the urge to masturbate was nothing less than a spiritual crisis. As he commented on one occasion, immediately after he “intentionally defiled” himself once again, “I do not know whether I shall be able to bear the burden of my sin” (June 12, 1723). Four days later, his guilt notwithstanding, he masturbated again. The habit was clearly stronger than the remedy of frequent prayers. The temptation was even more unbearable when he started courting a woman, or just happened to think about “the girls’ chamber.” It threw him into the state of utter sexual perplexity. The refrain “I defiled myself” crowns at least thirty diary entries. They can be read as a refrain of Puritan sensationalism at large—a guilt-ridden acknowledgment of one’s sensuality which was judged against what was assumed to be God’s disdain for such things.<sup>48</sup>

Fortunately for Wigglesworth and Moody, their sexual secrets were never made public. But as they knew quite well, their habits were potentially scandalous. On one occasion Moody happened to notice another man, a guest in his father’s house, masturbating. For whatever reason, Moody told on him, and the shameless wretch was thrown out of the house (July 23, 1723). What this episode reminded Moody was that if his sexual habit became known to someone else, he would certainly find himself in the middle of a scandal. The episodes like this suggest that although public’s knowledge of ministers’ transgressions was very limited, there was some awareness of their potentially scandalous behavior. Ministers, for their part, had some knowledge of such cases—their own lapses, or those of other ministers. The public also must have known something about ministers’ occasional transgressions from rumors. Joseph Moody’s life, for

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<sup>48</sup> Moody’s diaries are cited from Philip M. Woodwell’s translation, *Handkerchief Moody, the Diary & the Man* (Portland, ME: Colonial Offset Printing Co., 1981). See also Brian D. Carroll’s “‘I indulged my desire too freely’: Sexuality, Spirituality, and the Sin of Self-Pollution in Diary Joseph Moody, 1720-1724” (*The William and Mary Quarterly* 60.1 [2003]: 155-170).

example, left a trail of strange tales about the minister. More than a century later, Nathaniel Hawthorne adopted them in “The Minister's Black Veil” (1836), a short story about a clergyman’s duplicity. Its protagonist, the Reverend Hooper, is burdened by some unmentionable sin, which he has no courage to communicate to his parishioners. He chooses to wear a black veil, possibly as a sign of his corrupt nature. The factual connections between Joseph Moody’s life and “The Minister's Black Veil” are weak, but what Hawthorne’s story reminds is that ministers’ lives were often subjected to persistent rumors, which gradually contributed to public’s growing mistrust of the clergy.

The escalation of religious tensions in the colonies, particularly during the Great Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s, contributed to this trend. The revivals, as we saw in Chapter II, precipitated a hostile rhetorical warfare, which was inspired by disagreements about the ways of promoting religious causes. Ministers, in their attacks on each other, often adopted acerbic tone to make scandalous accusations. Allegations of sexual impropriety were not uncommon. It was not difficult to suggest that itinerant revivalists, who emphasized the importance of impulses and senses, were simply promiscuous vagabonds. George Whitefield, the most famous eighteenth-century revivalist, acquired the image of a sanctimonious womanizer. What most people remembered about him was not his sermons but allegations of his improprieties which his opponents and satirists concocted. It is not a coincidence, for example, that Thomas Rowlandson’s satire of priesthood includes a little but telling detail (Fig. 4.3). It depicts a woman who masturbates a minister in a room decorated with a portrait of Whitefield. In this context, Whitefield’s well-known gesture (holding both arms up in the air) could be interpreted as a blessing of the sex act. Indeed, as Charles Chauncey alleged, itinerant revivalists could be compared to “*evil Men and Seducers*” who “*creep into Houses*” and “*lead captive silly Women*” (*Seasonable Thoughts* 370). He could, for example, point out



Figure 4.3: Thomas Rowlandson's "The Sanctified Sinner."

James Davenport, the revivalist who was notorious for his erratic behavior and the eye-catching habit of stripping his clothes while preaching. It was rumored that some women in his audience did the same. Subsequently, several revivalist ministers were tried, censured, or dismissed for their role in the revivals, which not only reaffirmed the trend on putting clergy on trial but also established the tradition of exploiting such events in press.

Sexual accusations against clergy skyrocketed in the aftermath of the American Revolution. There were several factors that contributed to this trend. The most obvious one was the bad European influence; Europe had a long tradition of implicating religious figures in sex scandals. It can be assumed that the American writers who wrote about clergymen's sex lives drew inspiration from European literature. But there were also other reasons why this genre became so important in the United States. First, Americans grew increasingly mistrustful of figures of authority in general. Political debates and scandals, which became a permanent fixture of American politics in the aftermath of the Revolution, could not but help instill the notion that clergymen and politicians could not always be trusted. Second, the growing religious diversity in the United States inspired mistrust among people of different denominations. Some Americans, as we can judge by the contemporary cartoon titled "Mystery of Babylon" (1835), even grew disrespectful of

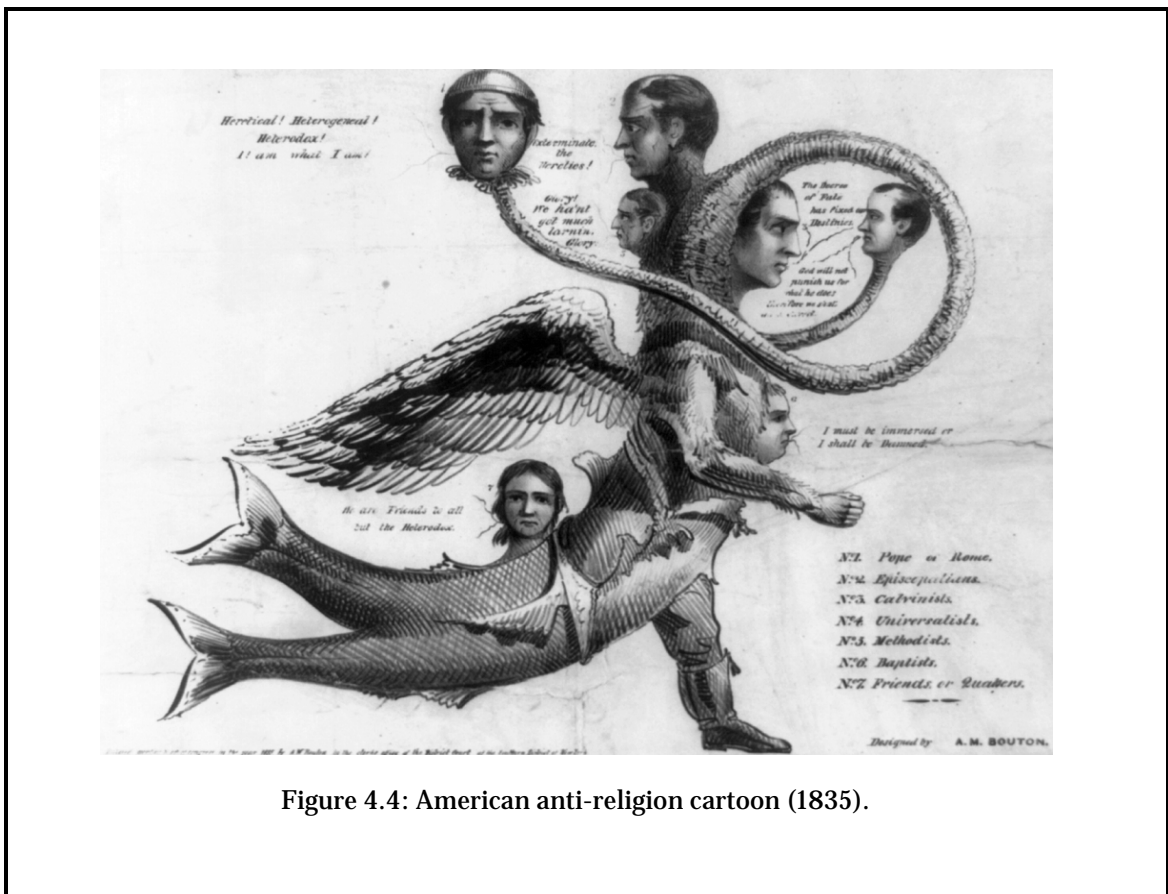
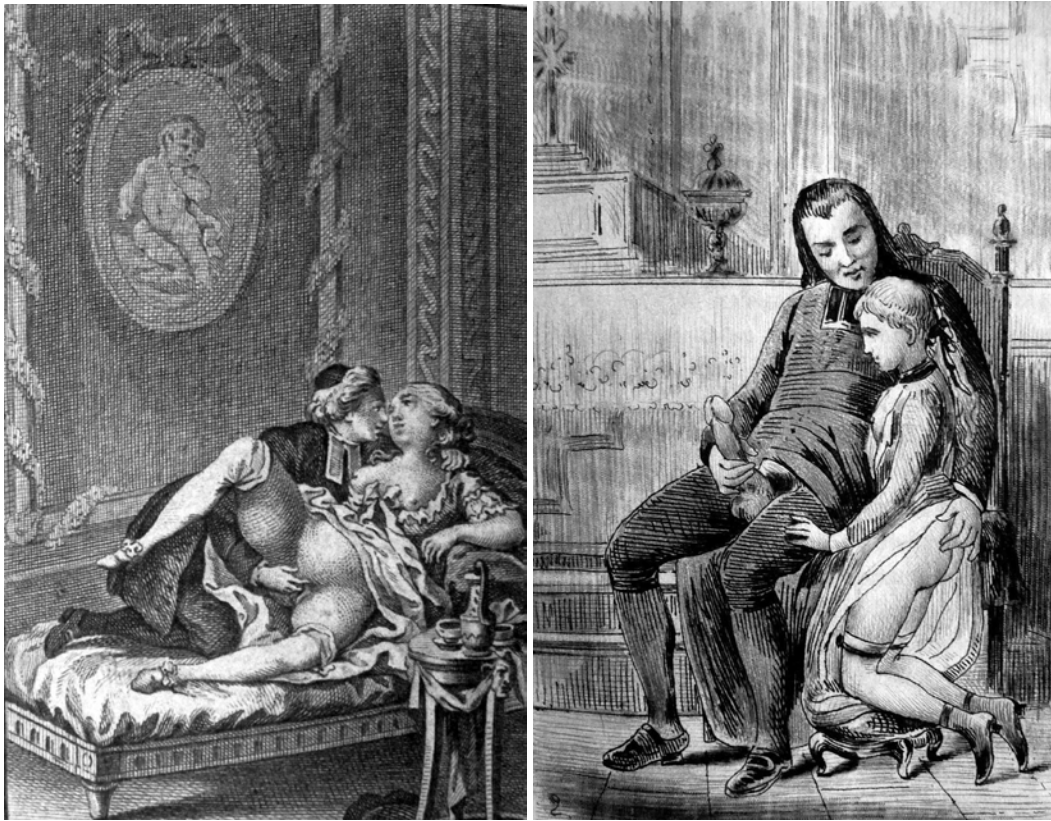


Figure 4.4: American anti-religion cartoon (1835).

all major forms of Christianity (Fig. 4.4). The cartoon depicts religion as a monster with many heads, each of which representing different forms of Christianity: Catholics, Episcopalians, Calvinists, Universalists, Methodists, Baptists, and Quakers. It also suggests that their religious leaders were mere quacks.

Early Americans' antipathy toward Catholicism, which was acerbated by the rise of immigration from predominantly Catholic countries, boosted the popularity of anti-clerical publications about sex crimes perpetrated by priests. Europe, by then, already had a rich canon of literature vilifying the clergy; we can discern traces of anti-clericalism in the works of such well-known European writers and poets as Boccaccio, Dante, Rabelais, Aretino, Rousseau, Radcliffe, and many others. We can even get a better sense of European anti-clericalism from popular works, which indulged readers with stories about fiendish priests, lascivious monks, and debauched nuns. Gregorio Leti (1630-1701), to start with a recognizable name, penned several amazingly provocative books, which were translated into English. His *Il Putanismo Romano, or the History of the Whores and Whoredoms of the Popes* (1670) decried Catholic leaders as sex-crazed criminals who taxed the poor to death and supplemented their income by exploiting prostitutes. In fact, Leti went so far as to allege that all Catholic clergy started their religious careers as boy prostitutes: "There are no other persons found going up and down the stairs of the *Vatican*, but old Sodomitical Boys" (94).

Other popular books about the depravity of Catholic clergymen include *The Adamite, or, The Loves of Father Rock and his Intrigues with the Nuns* (1683), *Frauds of the Romish Monks and Priests* (1691), *Les amours de Sainfroid et Eulalie* (1729), Gervaise de Latouche's *Histoire de Dom D. . . . portier des Chartreux* (1741-2), *Thérèse philosophe* (1748), *The Cloisters Laid Open, or, Adventures of the Priests and Nun* (1770), and the Marquis de Sade's infamous *Justine* (1791). Equally alluring were books about corrupt nuns, particularly Gabriel de Brémont's *Le Cercle* (1673), translated as *The*



Figures 4.5 & 4.6: Illustrations from *Thérèse philosophe* (1785) and an American edition of *The Amours of Sanfroid and Eulalia* (1854).

*Amorous Abbess, or, Love in a Nunnery* (1684), and Jean Barrin's notorious *Venus dans le Cloitre* (1683), known in England as *Venus in the Cloister*. In England, where prejudice against Catholicism was pervasive, publishers eagerly appeased their readers with a wide array of scandalous works about Catholic priests' alleged perversity. Some of those publications eventually found their way to the British colonies in North America, where colonists were not particularly fond of Catholicism.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>The "Anti-Popistical" chapter of Roger Thompson's *Unfit for Modest Ears* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979) offers a comprehensive survey of the anti-Catholic literature published in England in the seventeenth century. For an alternative survey of the eighteenth-century English and French materials, see the "Anti-Catholic Erotica" chapter in Julie Peakman's *Mighty Lewd Books: The Development of Pornography in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: MacMillan, 2003).

In the United States, where till the middle of nineteenth century Catholicism was widely regarded as an utterly un-American religion, the rise of Catholic influence was perceived as a cause for alarm. The most ardent of American Protestants bewailed the erosion of traditional values and gave rise to various anti-Catholic associations, including the powerful Know Nothing movement that emerged in the 1840s with promises of curbing Catholic influence in the country. Its proponents were responsible for a number of well-publicized acts and even riots. In 1848, for example, they orchestrated a capture of the Washington Monument, which was still under construction, when it became known that Pope Pius IX contributed a memorial stone to the site. Election violence, instigated under the pretext of resisting Catholic influence, was fairly common as well. Publishers, for their part, skillfully exploited Americans' disdain for Catholicism. Contemporary cartoons mercilessly vilified Catholics as aggressors who threatened the young republic and its democratic principles (Fig. 4.7). A wide array of provocative publications, which were marketed as legitimate efforts to acquaint the public with the religion that was so rapidly spreading its influence in the country, shocked readers with stories about priests' backwardness, corruption, and perversity.

What is remarkable about American anti-Catholic publications is the precarious balance between their claims of being truthful and the unquestionably outrageous character of their revelations. Their strategy was fairly common. They usually used true stories (a trial of a Catholic priest or a scandal in a monastery) as occasions to lecture readers about the alleged evils of Catholicism. Take, for example, the pamphlet titled *The Trial of the Rev. Francis Riebauer, a Roman Catholic Priest, for the Murder of Anna Eichstaedter* (1846). What is quite telling about its author's agenda is that the pamphlet was based on the case that should not have bothered Americans at all; the Riebauer affair took place all the way in Germany almost three decades before this pamphlet was published. But the author assured his readers that it was important to resurrect this case

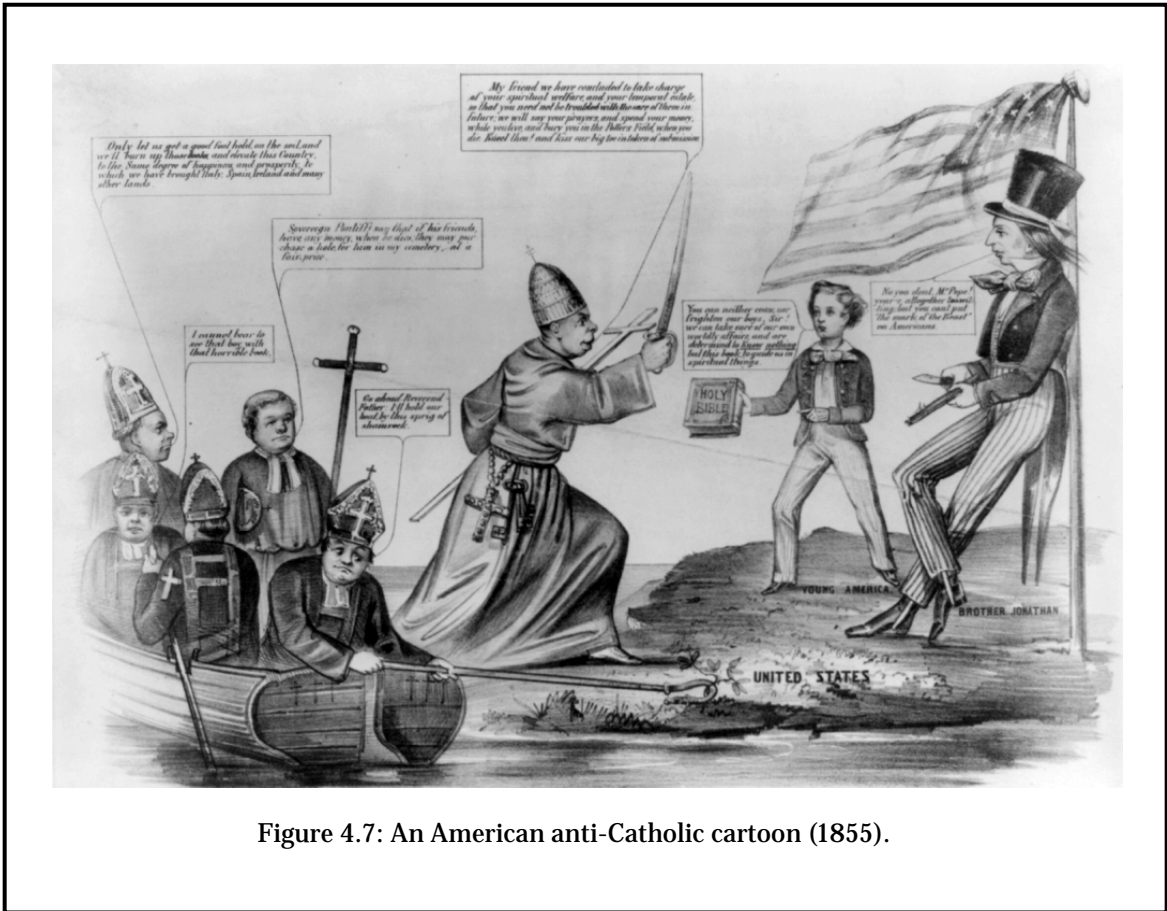
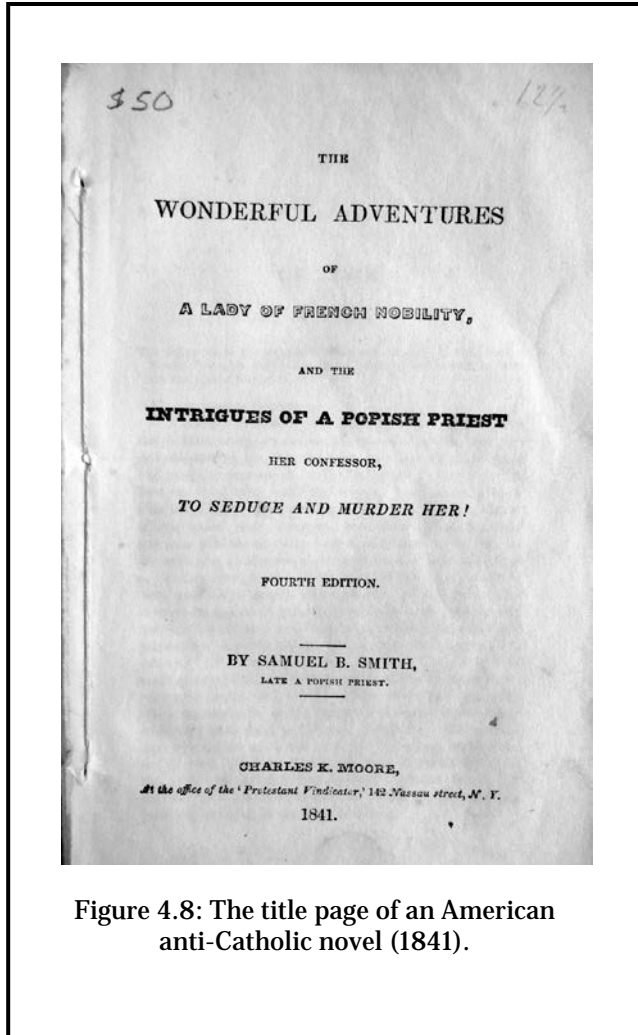


Figure 4.7: An American anti-Catholic cartoon (1855).

to understand “*the pernicious doctrines*” of Catholicism (iii). It is not surprising that a substantial portion of the pamphlet has little to do with the Riembauer case. Instead, it reads like a torrent of scandalous revelations about Catholic clergy and the popes. Among other things, the author thought it was necessary to mention that the Pope John XII was “killed in the very act of adultery,” Clement V was “a public debauchee,” and Innocent X “lived ten years in *open adultery* with Donna Olimpia, his brother’s wife” (23). Richard Baxter’s *Jesuit Juggling* (1835), which bore a screaming subtitle *Forty Popish Frauds Detected and Disclosed*, went on to allege that many priests and popes were incorrigible sodomites. In his view, Catholicism was not a religion but a cult of “gluttony, drunkenness and whoredom (219-20). The editor of the 1834 American edition of Scipio de Ricci’s *Female Convents: Secrets of Nunneries Disclosed* (1834), another anti-Catholic classic, simply stated that the unnatural and undemocratic



principles promoted by the Catholic Church were “*totally incompatible with civil and religious liberty, and equally destructive of individual liberty, social decorum, and national intelligence and enjoyments*” (iii). The book refers to monasteries as “prolific sources of the most horrid uncleanness” and “dens of ignorance, sloth, and corruption” (xii, xviii). With the rise of Catholic immigration in the United States, American writers claimed that it was their patriotic duty to disclose such crimes (monks’ per chance for sodomy, priests’

debauching young girls, and seductions of nuns) for the benefit of their compatriots.

The spectrum of early American anti-Catholic literature was enriched by another peculiar subgenre—confessions penned by young women who claimed to have survived ordeals of monastery life. George Bourne’s *Lorette: The History of Louise, Daughter of a Canadian Nun* (1834) is a typical example. In the tradition of Sade’s *Justine*, it was marketed as a young woman’s account of her escape from a convent where she was nearly forced to become a sex slave. “I perceived,” as she summarized her experiences, “that a monastic life is a complete masquerade, in which all the characters are either devotees of vice, or skeletons of misery” (55). Other writers echoed the sentiment. Before the readers could forget *Lorette*, there appeared two more shockers, Rebecca Reed’s *Six*



Figure 4.9: An advertisement of an American anti-Catholic novel (1854).

*Month in a Convent* (1835) and Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (1836). The books' refrain was the same: they offered "true" stories about Catholic decadence and its pernicious influence. The stories were meant to be read metaphorically. Reed's confession was marketed as a tale of "a humble Protestant girl, who had been deluded into the Catholic Church and escaped from her spiritual thralldom" (17). The heroine's escape from the grip of that church was meant to reflect the author's hope that the entire country

could escape the rising influence of Catholicism.<sup>50</sup>

As the number of Catholics in the United States continued to rise, American publishers continued to exploit Americans' uneasiness about the Catholic influence. This is what explains the popularity of such sensationalist works as *Rosamond: or, A Narrative of the Captivity and Sufferings of an American Female under the Popish Priests, in the Island of Cuba* (1836), *The Wonderful Adventures of a Lady of French Nobility, and the Intrigues of a Popish Priest, her Confessor, to Seduce and Murder Her*

<sup>50</sup> For a general introduction on the subject, see Ray Allen Billington's "The Burning of the Charlestown Convent" (*New England Quarterly* 10.1 [1937]: 4-24) and Nancy Lusignan Schultz' introduction to *Veil of Fear*, a recent reissue of Reed's and Monk's novels (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1999).

(1836), *The Protestant Girl in a French Nunnery* (1846), *Eleanor Mayfield, or, the Priest's Victim* (ca. 1850), *Paul and Julia; Or, The Political Mysteries, Hypocrisy and Cruelty of the Leaders of the Church of Rome* (1855), and *Claude in a Convent; Or the Nuns and the Highwaymen* (1855).<sup>51</sup>

Accusations of sexual impropriety were also fairly common within the Protestant ranks, particularly after the Revolution. At first (it was an echo of the Great Awakening) there was an outburst of various religious disputes—trials for heresy, libel, and even simple grievances in religious schools—which gradually eroded the public's respect for religious leaders. It seemed that even minor disputes could easily throw a religious figure in the midst of a controversy. The press made such scandals even more contentious; the words *trial* and *reverend* figured in the titles of so many publications that the idea of a clergyman on trial became remarkably common. It was only a matter of time before the public's attention would turn to an even more scandalous aspect of ministers' lives—their sexual proclivities.

To the public, ministers' sex habits were a much more enticing subject than disagreements about their religious views. American writers and journalists were quick to respond to the growing interest in this captivating topic, offering a range of titillating revelations while fulfilling what they claimed was their social duty of exposing the truth. The range of such publications was remarkable; they clearly escaped the narrow confines of didacticism. Some publications purported to be serious in their intent while others were meant to be comical. Such diversity was a sign of evolution in American sensationalism, boosting the popularity of sensationalist pamphlets that appealed to wide audience.

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<sup>51</sup> For other examples of antebellum anti-Catholic fiction, see David S. Reynolds' *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

A telling example is the anonymous poem titled “Brothers of the Clergy” (also known as “Priest and Deacon”), which was published as a broadside sometime in the 1790s (Fig. 4.10). The poem recalls an amusing encounter between a minister and a guilt-ridden deacon, who came to confess his incorrigible habit of fornication. The minister dutifully heard the deacon’s confession but quickly calmed the young man down. As he explained, sleeping with women was a negligible offense. He even offered some examples from the Bible; David and Solomon were known for their amorous misdemeanors but were still considered “the men of God’s own heart.” The important thing was, of course, to hide one’s proclivities. The priest reminded the deacon that showing any sign of guilt could make people “think us none divine, / Nor pay their offering at our shrine.”

What is noteworthy about the poem is the author’s strategy of treating this seemingly serious subject with an amusingly comical touch. He did not want to burden his readers with the seriousness of this issue, ending the poem with a rather entertaining scene. The two clergymen made a bet over who slept with more women in their parish. They decided to count them right before the Sunday service, when their parishioners arrive to church. To be discreet, the deacon said that he would raise his hand if he was to see any of his lovers. If the minister saw one of his paramours, he would utter a “hem.” Once people started to arrive, the minister “hem’d and hem’d again” while the deacon’s arm started to move “like saw-gate,” even when his rival’s wife entered the church. Apparently, one was as guilty as the other: “Betwixt us both, / (*we have kiss’d the Parish over.*)”

## BROTHERS OF THE CLERGY.

**T**WO brothers of the clergy met,  
 And smok'd and talk'd of this and that,  
 Whilst just to recreate the body,  
 Sip'd sometimes wine and sometimes toddy  
 Thus for a while they wore the mask,  
 And one another gravely ask'd,  
 If that religion did increase  
 Among their flocks, if all was peace ;  
 If persons of the first condition  
 To holy church paid due submission ;  
 If that no principles were spread,  
 But faithful converts daily made.  
 Thus they went on till grog and wine  
 Had made their reverend cheeks to shine ;  
 Till spirituous juices so prevail'd,  
 The spirit of religion fail'd ;  
 The mask thrown off, the joyous join,  
 In honor to the God of wine.  
 Each tells a story, sings a song,  
 And thus the time glides sweetly on :  
 At length quoth parson Sly, I'll tell thee  
 Of something which of late befel me—  
 Some weeks ago my eldest deacon  
 By chance, had got his conscience smitten  
 For some achievements he'd transacted,  
 In Venus school, but not detected ;  
 How'er he came into my study,  
 His face was sad, his brains seem'd muddy ;  
 Snevill, I cry'd, what all contrition?  
 O help, said he my soul's Physician ;  
 If for me you have any care,  
 " A wounded spirit who can bear,"  
 I shut my book, and laid it down.  
 I'd just been reading Hadington,  
 Deacon, said I what all this pother,  
 Have you lost your wife, or mother,  
 Or has your sorrel mare been stole  
 Which makes you thus lament and howl !  
 No, reverend Sir, not one of these  
 My steady temper e'er could teaze,  
 Alas, my conscience is convicted  
 For something past that I transacted  
 I fear no pardon will be given,  
 And I at last shall miss of Heaven ;  
 I read last night before my Prayer  
 Such sinners never enter there,  
 Poh ! said I leave off this strain,  
 Or all our cares will be in vain ;  
 For should you appear to doubt,  
 Whether your name is in, or out  
 Of book of life ; and rail like mad man,  
 For whats entail'd on Father Adam ;  
 By and by they'll think us none divine,  
 Nor pay their offerings at our shrine ;  
 From them I shall receive no gifts,  
 For you no fragments will be left ;  
 Therefore you always should inherit  
 A double portion of the spirit  
 To stick with all the vulgar car,  
 Whom next to us those fools revere ;  
 But pray thee tell me what's the matter,  
 That I may comfort thee, thee better ;  
 Alas ! I've been a fornicator.  
 Poh says I, is this the bear,  
 That's driven you almost to despair ;  
 Read but your bible, learn of old,  
 The stories of the Patriarch told ;

How David, Solomon, and others  
 Had their amours, enjoy'd their lovers ;  
 These things almost our Picadillas,  
 For these they neer hang harp on willows,  
 Besides the scriptures do impart  
 They were the men of Gods own heart.  
 Those lives were given for example,  
 And proof like this I quote and handle  
 The deacon pleas'd with my advice,  
 First blew his nose, then wip'd his eyes ;  
 Kind Sir, says he you must be right,  
 For you have eas'd my conscience quite  
 And since such patterns you have shewn,  
 I wish that someting more I'd done,  
 Howe'er, I'll lay, you have amind to,  
 That more than you I've been kind to,  
 A bottle of the best campaign  
 To drink, when we shall meet again.  
 My hand upon't quoth I, tis done,  
 And thus the matter shall be known ;  
 Next Sunday we'll o church repair,  
 The ladies always gather there :—  
 You list your hand and I'll cry hem  
 When one of these shall enter in ;  
 By this concerted plan we'll know,  
 What cash has done, and who, and who  
 Content he cry'd, and further said ;  
 Indeed this is a wondrous scheme,  
 I'm really pleas'd with such a theme.  
 Next Sunday both to church repair,  
 Before the ladies had got there ;  
 I arose and exercise began,  
 When at the door in haste one  
 I cast my eyes but made no stand,  
 I saw up list the deacon's hand ;  
 The next fair damsel that came in,  
 I said O Lord, the next was hem,  
 Then cast my eyes to'ards tother door,  
 And hem'd and hem'd again twice more ;  
 Then with my exercise went on,  
 And lo ! there came a brilliant throng ;  
 And quickly up the ally shov'd  
 The deacon's hand like saw-gate mov'd.  
 But one thing more, I blush to tell  
 Which to my reverend ship befel,  
 The next that came upon my life,  
 Was her I thought my faithful wife.  
 The deacon too, well pleas'd is seem'd  
 And as in triumph rais'd his hand.  
 Thinks I the deacon means to banter,  
 I long to see the deaconess enter  
 He had his hand but scarcely drop'd  
 When in the long'd for object pop'd ;  
 In midst of prayer I make a stand,  
 And with a vengeance scatch'd a hem ;  
 Then turn'd my voice and eyes to heaven,  
 Much as to say, Sir, we are even,  
 Twas thus by turns, our signs went on,  
 Until I'd counted fifty one ;  
 And thought the deacon had won the bottle  
 And I cry'd hem, till well nigh throttle'd.  
 As soon as exercise was done  
 As we together walked home.  
 Quoth he I think I was mistaken  
 Before the Priest has beat the deacon,  
 But this great truth, I now discover,  
 Betwixt us both (*we have kiss'd the Parish*  
*ser.*)

Figure 4.10: "Brothers of the Clergy" (ca. 1790).

This short poem perfectly captures the contradictions and the trajectory of this genre. Such affairs could be, its author implied, a serious matter. Many writers who wrote about sex scandals often felt compelled to give the impression that they treated such revelations with utmost seriousness. On the other hand, it is obvious that the poem overall is comical. It transformed a serious subject into something irreverently entertaining. Such works paved the way for publications which were meant to be enjoyable rather than thought-provoking.

Early in the nineteenth century revelations of ministers' misdemeanors started to break out with an alarming frequency. Particularly common were accusations of sexual impropriety, a crime not yet defined as what we today would call *sexual harassment*. In 1822 a Methodist preacher John Newland Maffitt went on trial for various religious transgressions which, the persecutors alleged, were aggravated by his "loose, light, and lascivious conduct" (*Report of the Trial of Mr. John N. Maffitt* 6). In 1844 a similar charge was made against the Episcopalian leader Benjamin T. Onderdonk, who became embroiled in one of the most scandalous trials of the decade. Also memorable was the trial of Revilo F. Parshall, "a very popular and remarkably successful [Baptist] preacher" who was accused of "licentiousness, impudence, and bad example" (*Trial of the Rev. Revilo F. Parshall* 3). He had to face the accusations of several young women who stepped forward to affirm and detail the minister's frequent sexual advances towards them (he offered to pay them for sexual favors). He was found guilty in two trials, in 1859 and 1860, which left enough material to provoke lively sensationalist news coverage.

Equally frequent were trials for adultery and seduction. Some cases were so outrageous that they hardly had to be exaggerated for readers' enjoyment. Washington Van Zandt stood trial for trying to seduce a young woman of eighteen, which would not have been that bad if it was not revealed that he also "took very indecent liberties with her sister, a girl of 12 years of age, and with young and interesting female members of his

congregation—ladies of the highest respectability” (*Trial of Rev. Washington Van Zandt* 4). Not much time passed before two other ministers, Issachar Grosscup and Joy Hamlet Fairchild, went on trial for similar crimes; Grosscup was accused of seducing a daughter of a man in whose house he lodged while Fairchild stood trial for impregnating his young female servant. The latter turned out to be a particularly captivating event. During the trial his accuser revealed that Fairchild used his knowledge of the scriptures to seduce her. As she alleged, the minister drew examples from “the Bible to induce me to submit to his base designs” by arguing, for example, that if King David “had more than one wife . . . there was no reason why he could not” (*A Full and Accurate Report of the Trial of Rev. Joy H. Fairchild* 3). For many, the trial was a shocking reminder of how perverted some ministers were. The scandal became even more sensational when Fairchild tried to commit suicide in anticipation of the guilty verdict. When he was actually acquitted, the public was outraged.

Clergymen’s trials for rapes and murders were even more numerous. The 1822 case of William Hogan, who was tried for an attempted rape and battery, threw a prominent religious figure into a sex scandal that turned his name into a byword of clerical duplicity. The 1833 trial of Ephraim K. Avery, who was implicated in the murder of a young woman who died of either a violent rape or a botched abortion, inspired a real journalistic frenzy. Three years later, in 1836, Joseph Carter, a married man of advanced age, went on trial for an assault “with intent to violate” a woman of thirty. Augustus Littlejohn, a revivalist minister from Western New York, was tried in 1841 for raping a nineteen year-old “colored girl.” Then a year later, in 1842, the country was shocked and thrilled to read about the Indiana case of Romain Weinzoeplein, the Catholic priest who allegedly raped a twenty year-old married woman while she prayed after her confession. The crimes of other ministers, who were tried for abuse, brutality, homosexuality, and

murder, even further eroded the public's trust in religious leaders. The following is a list of some known trials that involved ministers in the antebellum period.<sup>52</sup>

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**A Partial List of American Clergymen on Trial for Sexual Transgressions and Violent Crimes: 1810-1860**

- 1810, **William Parkinson** (New York, Baptist) stood trial for **assault and battery**; his accuser claimed that he tried to rape her.
- 1812, **David Barclay** (New Jersey, Presbyterian) stood trial for **adultery**.
- 1820, **Ammi Rogers** (Connecticut, Episcopal) was found guilty of **seduction** and forcing his victim to have an abortion "with pernicious and poisonous drugs."
- 1821, **William Hogan** (Pennsylvania, Roman Catholic) was tried for an attempted **rape and battery** of Mary Connell.
- 1822, **John Newland Maffitt** (John N. Maffitt) (Massachusetts, Methodist) was tried for various religious transgressions as well as "**loose, light, and lascivious conduct**."
- 1830, **Samuel Arnold** (Massachusetts) was accused of **whipping a boy to death**.
- 1832, 1835, **Charles L. Cook** (Massachusetts) was forced to leave ministry in 1832 for his "**lewd conduct**" and "highly aggressive and unchristian character." Three years later, in 1835, he was put on trial as an accomplice in theft, when it turned that he was also guilty of **sexually abusing boys** in his employ.
- 1833, **Ephraim K. Avery** (Rhode Island, Methodist) was tried for **brutal rape and murder** of Maria Cornell.
- 1835, **John Robert McDowall** (New York, Presbyterian) was defrocked on charges of fraud which were in part motivated by suspicions of **sexual impropriety**.
- 1835, **Eleazer Sherman** (Eleazar Sherman) (Rhode Island, Evangelical) was convicted in an ecclesiastical court for **sodomy**.
- 1836, **Joseph Carter** (New York) was tried for an **attempted rape** and found guilty of an assault.

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<sup>52</sup> For an alternative list of trials, sources, and their analysis, see Karin E. Gedge's *Without Benefit of Clergy: Women and the Pastoral Relationship in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Chapter IX of David S. Reynolds' *Beneath the American Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

- 1836, **Barnabas Phinney** (Massachusetts) was accused of **adultery**.
- 1837, **Ray Porter** (Rhode Island, Baptist) publicly confessed his **adultery**.
- 1839, **Francis L. Hawks** (Hawkes) (New York, Episcopalian) was accused of unspecified **sexual improprieties** by George Dixon, the editor of the *Polyanthos*. Although Hawks successfully repelled the accusations and sued Dixon for libel, the scandal received much attention in press.
- 1839, **Samuel F. Jarvis** (New York, Episcopal) was sued by his wife for divorce on the grounds of his **violent temper, abuse, and adultery**.
- 1841, **Washington Van Zandt** (New York, Episcopal) was found guilty of **seducing** an eighteen-year-old woman. The trial revealed that he also took sexual interest in the victim's twelve year-old sister.
- 1841, **Augustus Littlejohn** (New York, Revivalist) was tried for **raping** a nineteen year-old African-American woman.
- 1842, **S. Phillips** (Virginia) was tried for having an **affair** with a married woman.
- 1842, **Romain Weinzoeplein** (Roman Weinzoeplein) (Indiana, Catholic) was accused of trying to **rape** a twenty year-old married woman while she prayed after her confession.
- 1843, **George Marshall** (Pennsylvania) was tried for "**fornication and bastardy**."
- 1844, **Benjamin T. Onderdonk** (New York, Episcopal) was found guilty for **inappropriate sexual behavior**.
- 1844, **Joy Hamlet Fairchild** (Massachusetts, Congregational) was accused of **seducing and impregnating** a young woman in his employ.
- 1847, **William Gilmore** (Ohio, Presbyterian) was tried for **adultery**.
- 1847, **John Seys** (New York, Methodist) was charged with **assault and battery** although his victim claimed that he tried to rape her.
- 1848, **Issachar Grosscup** (New York, Baptist) was accused of **seducing** a young woman while he stayed in her father's house.
- 1850, **Darwin Mott** (Unitarian, Massachusetts) was forced to resign after an alleged **affair** with a woman in his congregation.
- 1853, **George W. Carawan** (South Carolina) was tried for **murdering** his boarder. At the end of the trial, in which he was found guilty, he shot one of the persecutors and then killed himself right in the courtroom.

1857, **I.S. Kalloch** (Massachusetts, Baptist) was tried for **adultery**.

1859, **Henry Budge** (New York, Presbyterian) was tried for **murder**.

1859, **Jacob Harden** (New Jersey, Methodist) was found guilty of **poisoning his wife**.

1860, **Revilo F. Parshall** (New York, Baptist) was accused of “**licentiousness, impudence, and bad example.**”

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The ways such trials were exploited in print betrayed some tensions between the didactic and voyeuristic streaks in American sensationalism. The trials were intensely covered not only in newspapers and pamphlets but also in such popular crime series as the *Interesting Trials* and the *Celebrated Trials*, which reminds us that sex scandals involving clergymen made a notable contribution to the growing popularity of crime literature in the United States. More often than not, publishers adhered to the principles of didactic sensationalism and claimed that their publications served a social purpose of raising awareness about various issues. Their task was not, as the author of *Trial of the Rev. William Gilmore* explained, to ponder “the corrupt tastes of the multitude” and “to gratify the morbid appetite for such reading” (12). Instead, they sought to “drag such unrighteous deeds to light” in order to advance “the cause of truth, and above all, the welfare of the Christian church” (9, 6). Note, for example, the moralizing tone of the following article denouncing corruption of the clergy:

A theme which has been the occasion of much grievous remark, and of much profoundly sad meditation, among the churches of our country, has been the fact that the ministerial profession of America has of late years been frequently stained with loathsome mark of debauchery and reverend libertinism. Fresh in the minds of everyone are the disgusting cases of Fairchild, and Van Zandt, and Ordendonk; and if anything has served to

bring religion and morality into disrepute, it has been the notorious dereliction of the professors of virtue . . . (“Romance of Rascality”)

But the moralizing tone of this article was not meant to be taken seriously. The majority of the article, which appeared in the racy newspaper *Life and Boston and New York*, was actually written as an amusing story about two philandering ministers. The same can be said about many other reports of this sort. They were meant to be appreciated for the voyeuristic pleasure they could impart rather than their perfunctory moralizing. In this respect, such publications were remarkable for their odd juxtaposition of stern didacticism and voyeuristic imagery.

This trend is also apparent in numerous cartoons inspired by such cases. One of



Figure 4.11: A contemporary caricature of the public's obsession with Ephraim K. Avery's murder of Sarah Maria Cornell (1833).

them, which appeared in the aftermath of Ephraim K. Avery's trial, offers a telling example (Fig. 4.11). At the center of the image is Avery murdering a young woman—not an amusing subject. At the same time the cartoon reminds us how easily such cases were turned into voyeuristic spectacles. It features a flock of demons who share sarcastic remarks as they observe the murder. This detail was meant to satirize the public's voyeuristic fascination with such crimes.

Some writers dramatized trial records to appeal to readers' literary sensibility. Their works even sported elaborate illustrations, poetic digressions, and literary references. In the case of *Only Full Report of the Trial of the Rev. I. S. Kalloch on Charges of Adultery*, the author mixed elements of mystery and romance by enticing readers with speculations about the identity of the mysterious "beautiful lady in black" with whom the reverend allegedly had an affair. He even drew some parallels between the Kalloch affair and Shakespeare's *Othello* (3). Readers with interests in something more dramatic could turn to the coverage of George W. Carawan's trial. One of its reports, which read like a gory crime novel, had a flashy title *Trial of the Rev. Geo. W. Carawan, Baptist Preacher, for the Murder of Clement H. Lassiter . . . Together with a Sketch of the Murderer's Life, and the Tragical Termination of the Trial—His Attempt, in Presence of the Court, to Shoot one of the Council who Appeared Against him on the Trial, and then Killing Himself* (1854). It was based on the scandal which was easy to turn into a dramatic tale far racier than typical works of fiction. What started as a simple murder trial (Carawan killed his boarder whom he accused of being too familiar with his wife) ended with a string of provocative revelations (the embattled minister was a habitual womanizer) and a dramatic court room shooting (when he heard the guilty verdict, Carawan shot his prosecutor and then killed himself right in the court room). *Trial of the Rev. Geo. W. Carawan* dramatized this story by including lyrical digressions

and imaginative descriptions to such an extent that it was ultimately hard to say whether the pamphlet was a work of fiction or a documentary report of a trial.

Popular antebellum novels are replete with colorful stories about religious hypocrites, corrupt lawyers, and dishonest politicians. In the country where the very notions of organized religion and law were repeatedly and sometimes violently renegotiated throughout its history, figures of authority were bound to become accused of duplicity and hypocrisy. One particularly notable manifestation of this trend was the immense popularity of novels and reports about the corruption of lawyers and aristocracy. They include such popular novels as Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1845), an exposé of the Philadelphia crime world, Buchanan's *Asmodeus: or . . . Mysteries, Vices and Doings as Exhibited by the Fashionable Circles of New York* (1848), and the works of Joseph H. Ingraham and George Thompson. Ingraham's *Miseries of New York* (1844) offers a typical example. The novel's arch-villain is a respected but depraved lawyer who tries to seduce his own son's fiancé; when he fails, he disowns his son, who in turn kills his father. George Thompson's novel *Venus in Boston* (1849) introduces yet another duplicitous lawyer, Mr. Tickels, a lascivious but respected lawyer who abducts a young woman in hope of turning her into his sexual slave. As he says to one his victims, "I am old enough to be your father; will you not confer upon me a daughter's love?" (65-6).

Antebellum novelists often portrayed ministers—fathers in spiritual sense—in equally unflattering terms. Their novels are filled with stories about religious hypocrites, the so called "reverend rakes," who demanded the public's respect while violating the commands they preached. Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), probably the most well-known novel about a dishonest minister, is fairly tame if compared to other contemporary novels about hypocritical clergymen. *The Confessions of a Magdalen* (1831) tells a story of a young woman who became a prostitute after she was sedated and raped by a minister. One of the most memorable characters of Lippard's *The Quaker City*

(1845) is the Reverend F. A. T. Pyne, an anti-Catholic demagogue whose religiosity barely conceals his depraved mindset and lust for beautiful young women. His victims call him father. He calls them daughters: “Put your arms round my neck and kiss me, that’s a good daughter” (294). The novelist George Thompson, for his part, made sure to include references to corrupt ministers and politicians in almost every novel he wrote. Lascivious Mr. Flanders, who appears in *City Crimes* (1849), is described as “a dear, good man” who offers religious instruction to young ladies with a habit of planting “a fatherly kiss upon the fair student of holy writ” (115). Equally corrupt is Dr. Sinclair, an eloquent and at some point a respectable moralizer who becomes “a wine bibber and a lover of the flesh” and eventually sinks to the lows of depravity. Thompson succinctly summed up his attitude toward clergy in the following terms: “Why are the misters of the gospel so prone to licentiousness? Because they are a set of hypocritical libertines” (213).

Novelists’ fondness for creating the characters of faulty fathers reflected the trend of vilifying figures of authority. References to child abuse, parricide, and tensions between children and fathers are remarkably common in popular antebellum novels. Their authors sought to dispel the notion that father figures embodied traditional values. It is remarkable how many novels by Ingraham, for example, are invested with parricidal sentiment. *The Miseries of New York* (1844) tells a story of a young man who kills his father who disowned and dishonored him. The young protagonist of *Jemmy Daily* (1843) is torn between his natural filial affection and utter hatred for his abusive alcoholic father; their relationship often turns violent. It appears that many novels of this sort were based on true stories, described in such pamphlets as *Life & Confession of Arnold: Who Inhumanly Whipped to Death Eunice Van Alburg, His Little Niece Aged 11 Years* (1805) and *An Astonishing Affair! The Rev. Samuel Arnold. Cast and Tried for his Cruelty . . .* (1830).

Frequent reports of child rape could not help but contribute to the anti-patriarchal spirit of the day. One 1811 paper mentioned a criminal convicted of raping a child of “10 or 11 years of age” (“Rape of a Child”). Another reported a criminal who satisfied “his base and hellish appetite” with an eight-year old girl (“Attempted Rape”). One crime blot in 1830 casually mentioned that one man was charged with “an assault and battery with intent to commit a rape of his own daughter” (“Father Rapes Daughter”). A man in Boston tried to do the same with a five-year old (“Five-Year-Old Raped”). It was also well known that children were sexually abused in prisons, where, as one observer commented in 1826, “BOYS ARE PROSTITUTED TO THE LUST OF OLD CONVICTS.”<sup>53</sup>

Slave narratives were filled with even more examples of disreputable fathers. Slave owners had a horrible habit of having extramarital affairs with their slaves, which created plenty of tensions within families and undermined the concept of fatherhood. In the words of Frederick Douglass, a son of a slave and her master, “thousands [of slaves] are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters” (*Narrative* 14). Situation in slave owners’ households was often quite absurd. They lived surrounded by their illegitimate children, whom they traded as slaves. Their legitimate daughters had their half-sisters as servants. Young white men were put to the task of physically punishing their enslaved siblings. As Douglass wrote,

The master is frequently compelled to sell [his illegitimate children], out of deference to the feelings of his white wife; and, cruel as the deed may

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<sup>53</sup> The lines are quoted from Louise Dwight’s private letter, dated April 24, 1826 (*American Broadside and Ephemera*, series I, no. 3090). It describes a typical story: “when a boy was sent to Prison, who was of a fair countenance, there many times seemed to be quite a strife between old grey headed villains, to secure his attention. Numerous presents were given for this purpose; and if it could be obtained, no art was left untried, to get the boy into the same room and into the same bed. A strong attachment would immediately follow. Meals and every dainty would be shared together, and they would, in many cases, afterwards, seem to have an undivided existence.”

strike any one to be, for a man to sell his own children to human flesh-mongers, it is often the dictate of humanity for him to do so; for, unless he does this, he must not only whip them himself, but must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother, of but few shades darker complexion than himself, and ply the gory lash to his naked back . . . (13-4)

Harriet Jacobs, in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), recalled in a particularly provocative story; one young woman was so angry with her father's habit of sleeping with slaves that she decided to have a child with "one of the meanest slaves on his plantation" (80). What Douglass's and Jacob's narratives suggest was that the concept of fatherhood in the antebellum South was overall quite meaningless. They offer plenty of other examples of deceitful slave owners who hide their crimes behind their superficial religiosity and hypocritical ministers who violate Christ's commands by endorsing the institution of slavery.

The popularity of stories about bad fathers, which I relate to Americans' fascination with scandalous revelations involving powerful figures, led to the emergence of new forms of sensationalism that achieved their effect by exposing the corruption of those who were meant to uphold traditional values. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, this development marked a new stage in the American tradition of didactic sensationalism. On the other hand, publications about such sex scandals were clearly didactic in their nature; they were written for the ostensibly legitimate purpose of combatting criminal behavior. At the same time, such publications revealed some rhetorical contradictions of didactic sensationalism. By scandalizing powerful figures, who traditionally monopolized the use of sensationalist rhetoric, American popular writers inadvertently put on trial the entire tradition of didactic sensationalism.

THE MAN WHO COUNTED ALL THE PROSTITUTES IN NEW YORK CITY:

JOHN ROBERT MCDOWALL AND THE SCANDAL OF *THE MAGDALEN REPORT*

To help us understand the transformation of American sensationalism in the nineteenth century, we can take a close look at the case of John Robert McDowall (1801-36), the Presbyterian minister who became famous for his controversial campaign against prostitution in New York City in the 1830s. He was, in many respects, a symbolic figure. It can be said that his work embodied the sensationalist tradition developed by his Puritan predecessors. Like them, he was convinced that all social problems were interconnected and needed to be methodically exposed in a sensationalist fashion. He also believed that by combating crime, particularly prostitution, he advanced America's Christian principles and cultural independence.

What is remarkable, however, is that McDowall's fate was different from that of his predecessors who successfully exploited the most scandalous issues in their works. For his part, McDowall encountered nothing but problems as he sought to expose the city's ills and reform its most corrupt inhabitants. Almost from the start of his campaign, which, in a typically sensationalist fashion, he opened with a series of scandalous revelations about the extent of prostitution in New York City, he was accused of impropriety, bad taste, and even licentiousness. He was ridiculed in press for his fascination with fallen women. He was demonized by some of his peers, who eventually forced him to resign his ministry. Exhausted by the controversy he created, he died at the age of thirty five. Why did McDowall, whose strategy was not much different from the one adopted by early American reformers and ministers, meet so much resistance? It was because by the early nineteenth century, the tradition of didactic sensationalism reached the point when its conventions could no longer escape public scrutiny. The McDowall affair brought to the surface the questions that lingered in American rhetoric for over two centuries. Was it really possible to rely on sensationalist techniques without

compromising the legitimacy of one's efforts? Could one confront scandalous issues without subjecting oneself to accusations of immorality?

McDowall was concerned about these questions from the days he was a student at Amherst and Princeton, where he studied to become a minister. Those who knew him personally believed that he was an exceedingly religious and pious young man. He worked with poor. He was not afraid to preach to unsavory people, including alcoholics and prostitutes, who were occasionally hostile to him (*Memoir* 64-5). After McDowall's death, his father did not hesitate to call his son a true martyr who followed God's call to help those in need. But personally McDowall was often concerned that his work with alcoholics and prostitutes, not to mention deists, could be seen as a sign of his own sinfulness. He was actually convinced that he was an utterly depraved individual, whose depravity would sooner than later become apparent to those around him. In his diary he described himself as "the vilest wretch in the sight of God in college" (70). He complained about "irregular desires" and "lusts," which woke him up at night and "led him astray" to commit the "known sin" (66, 69). He also accused himself of other sins, such as gluttony and laziness, and referred to himself in his prayers as "John M'Dowall, the unholy, vile, the polluted sinner" (67). What he was also concerned about was that the contrast between his public image of a pious student and his personal dismay about his depravity would sooner than later destroy his career. He could reform himself, he thought, by reforming others—by working with the most depraved people. It was this idea that prompted him to leave Princeton and, with the support of the ardent reformer Arthur Tappan, move to New York's most notorious slum, Five Points.

That infamous part of the city was a real urban inferno, a hell pit of crime and poverty populated with fallen women, orphans, boozers, destitute immigrants, and other outcasts. As George Foster described the place in *New York in Slices* (1849), Five Points was "the great central ulcer of wretchedness—the very rotting Skeleton of Civilization"

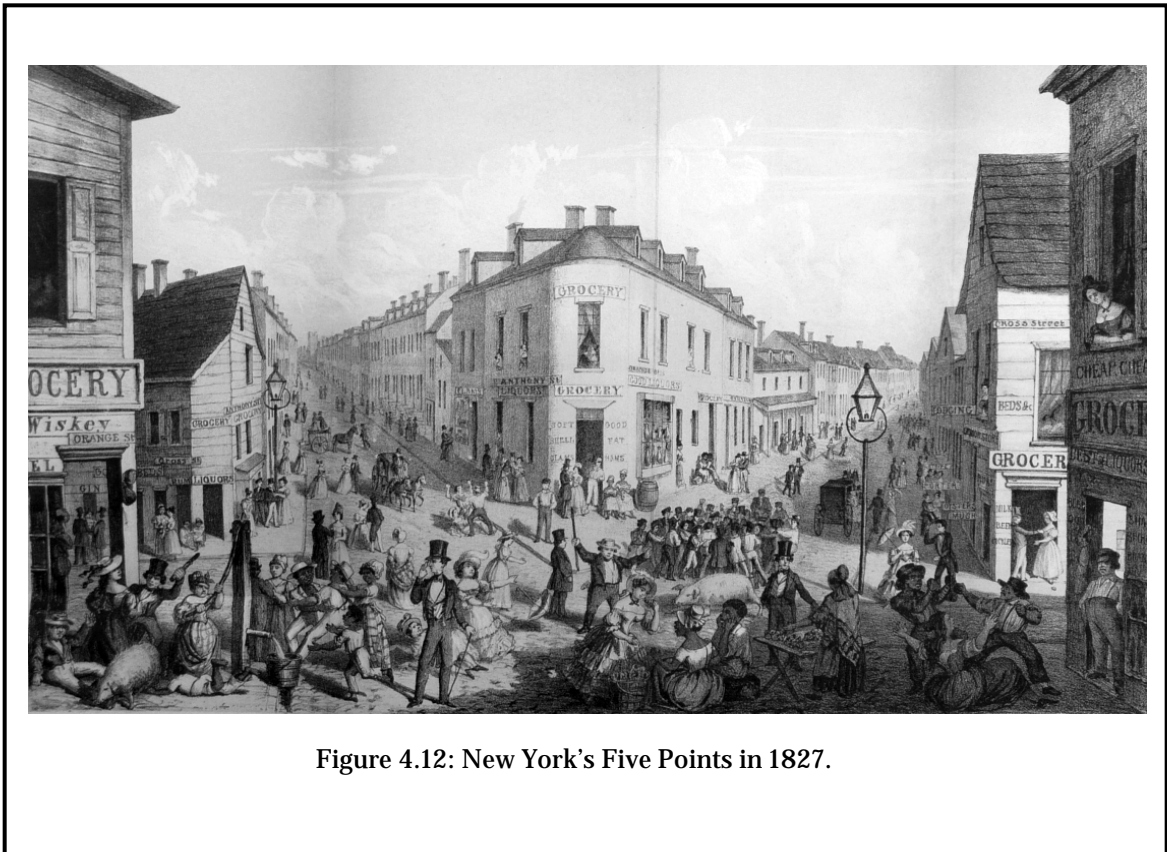


Figure 4.12: New York's Five Points in 1827.

(22). Surviving images of the neighborhood, like the one in *Valentine's Manual of Old New York* (1855), typically portray it as an utterly wicked place overrun by brawling drunks, street walkers, rakes, and criminals (Fig. 4.12). There was something reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno* in McDowall's descriptions of Five Points—ghost-like creatures loitered around, each with a horrible story to tell, but no one to hear them. For much of the nineteenth century, Five Points had the reputation of the most horrible and crime-ridden place in the country, inspiring scores of sensationalist crime novels and reports.

McDowall was particularly appalled by the extent of prostitution. As he claimed in one of his reports, there were as many as ten thousand prostitutes in New York, many of them congregating around Five Points and the nearby areas. The number of brothels was appalling. It also shocked him, the way it shocked many other tourists, that so many prostitutes did not even hide themselves. On Broadway, well-dressed courtesans took

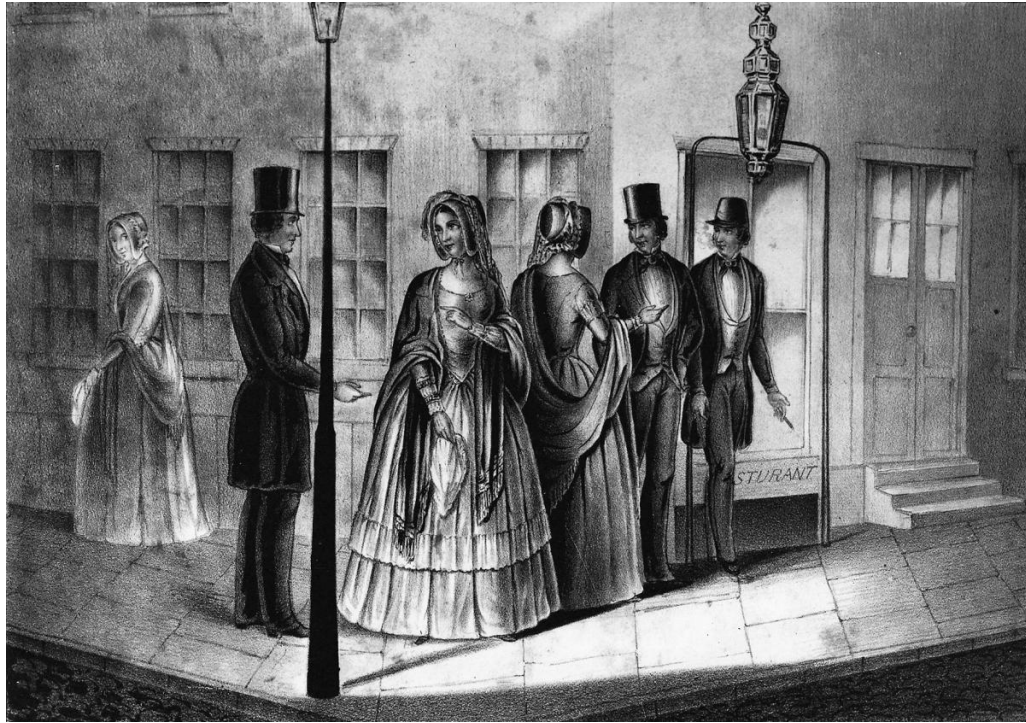


Figure 4.13: Prostitutes on the streets of New York (ca. 1850).

walks in search of well-to-do clients (Fig. 4.13). In the slums, scores of impoverished women offered sexual services to the less discriminate clientele. The prostitution was so widespread—and prostitutes were so unfazed—that McDowall found it difficult to describe what he saw for fear of violating his sense of modesty.

What bothered McDowall, among other things, was that prostitutes corrupted innocent young men. As he argued,

bad women multiply the seduction of heedless youth, more rapidly than bad men seduce modest women. A few of these courtesans suffice to corrupt whole cities, and there can be no doubt that some insinuating prostitutes have initiated more young men into these destructive ways, than the most abandoned rakes have debauched virgins during their whole lives. (*First Annual Report* 7)

To prove this point, he included a few examples of how prostitutes corrupted young men in his collection of didactic seduction tales titled *Magdalen Facts* (1832). In one story, an innocent “Jersey boy” moves to New York and, ensnared by prostitutes, becomes “a drunkard, a gambler, a bankrupt and a thief” (13). It was a typical case.<sup>54</sup> McDowall was therefore convinced that prostitution reform should focus on reforming prostitutes, rather than discouraging men from

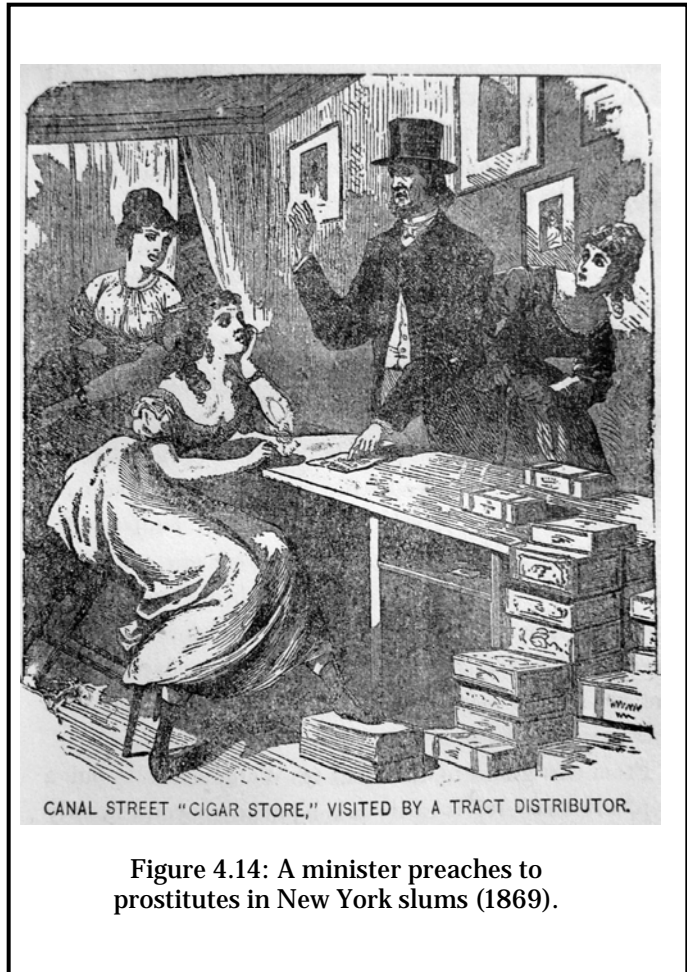


Figure 4.14: A minister preaches to prostitutes in New York slums (1869).

patronizing prostitutes. To this effect, he worked closely with prostitutes whom he visited in the most dangerous parts of the city. One day he met, one by one, more than one hundred prostitutes. He continued to work with them even when he was threatened with violence. What he hoped was that by persuading women to read the Bible he could turn them away from the life of crime. McDowall was, after all, a rather traditional minister who believed that all social problems could be solved by revitalizing people’s faith.

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<sup>54</sup> Several commentators emphasized that McDowall was more concerned with the fate of young men than women. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz writes in *Rereading Sex*, “Although McDowall’s exposé had plenty of rakes and villains who destroyed the flower of young womanhood, the primary figure in McDowall’s account is the male victim” (147). Barbara J. Berg makes a similar argument in *The Remembering Gate: Origins of American Feminism*, suggesting McDowall’s believed that prostitutes were solely responsible for their state (181).

What McDowall soon realized, however, was that his methods of combating prostitution were not efficient enough because he did not pay much attention to the causes of that social problem. Why did women turn to prostitution in the first place? Should not reformers acknowledge that prostitution was fueled by various social factors? Men who paid for sex were also guilty. He made this clear in his story titled “THE AWFUL DECEPTION OF A BRUTE IN THE SHAPE OF A MAN,” included in *Magdalen Facts*, which portrayed young women as helpless victims of men’s lust. Poverty and lack of legitimate opportunities for the so-called fallen women certainly contributed to the proliferation of prostitution. Prostitution was, in other words, a complex social issue which could be resolved only by forcing everyone to become aware of it—even if it meant violating the public’s sense of decency. After all, McDowall’s Puritan predecessors did just that, exposing various crimes in a sensationalist manner. McDowall’s strategy was to exasperate the public with a barrage of horrible details about prostitution. This approach would make him one of the most scandalous proponents of didactic sensationalism.

McDowall’s started his journalistic crusade against prostitution by co-authoring the *First Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the New York Magdalen Society* (1830), a fourteen-page publication better known as *The Magdalen Report*. It was followed with *Magdalen Facts* (1832), an eclectic collection of seduction tales, articles, documents, and diary entries about his work in Five Points. In 1833 he started *McDowall’s Journal*, designed “to expose public immorality, to elicit public sentiment, and to devise and carry into the effect the means of preventing licentiousness,” which earned him as much respect as notoriety (Jan 1833). He also contributed articles to such papers as *The Liberator*, *The New York Spectator*, and *The Observer and Telegraph*. His writings were reprinted in a large number of other papers throughout the country, which made him a widely recognizable figure and a target of those who deplored his sensationalist methods. In 1834 the third Presbytery of New York actually ordered him

to cease his journalistic activity and, when he failed to comply with that order, defrocked him on the charges of inappropriate conduct. This decision prompted McDowall to commence yet another journal, *McDowall's Defence*, which he used to defend his tarnished image. He died a year later, praised by some as “a martyr to the cause of virtue” and decried by others as a cheap provocateur (Davis 190). His controversial work, like the Puritan tradition of sensationalism at large, clearly divided the public in its attitude toward the legitimacy of sensationalism.

McDowall's indebtedness to the neo-Puritan brand of sensationalism is apparent in several areas. He imagined himself a true American jeremiad, whose task was to make his countrymen realize the extent of their depravity and, hopefully, awaken their appreciation for traditional values. Following the tradition of didactic sensationalism, McDowall insisted that provocative exposure of crime was essential for New Yorkers' effort to combat prostitution. As a journalist, he had an eye for horrifying details. As a preacher, he had an incorrigible habit of shocking his audience in the same manner Puritan ministers did in the past. In the words Lewis Tappan, McDowall was “more gifted in searching out and exposing iniquities than in suggesting remedies” (Tappan 114). Even when he preached to destitute people, his goal was to make his listeners aware of their sinfulness through fear. “Think of Hell,” he thundered in one sermon.

Think of your midnight reveling 'midst cursing, bitterness, fighting, drunkenness, theft, and murder—of your terrific dreams, and the shrieks of the lost echoing in your ears, in the lone hours of night—of your own criminal conduct, and resolution to commit suicide and murder . . . You already anticipate, yea, taste of agonies of the pit. Look! Here on this table lies a man; it is his body; his soul is now rejoicing in heaven, or is tormented in hell. In him behold your future situation. (*Facts* 25)

*The Magdalen Report* described New York as a horrific place in the manner reminiscent of seventeenth-century jeremiads. “The chastity of the nation is violated,” McDowall proclaimed,

the manners, the fashions, the habits, of society are full of seduction—and licentiousness daringly and unabashedly stalks abroad in its nakedness. Our profligacy, as a people, runs parallel with our oppression. We steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and then impiously declare that we are delivered to do all these abominations. (“Prostitution—McDowall’s Journal. . .”)

More than anything else, what New Yorkers remembered about the report was its assertion that “the number of females in this city who abandon themselves to prostitution is not less that [sic] TEN THOUSAND,” or about 10% of all women in the city.<sup>55</sup> The report went on to allege that the trade, like a disease, spread into every part of the city, with hundreds of seedy establishments hiding behind the mask of such legitimate ventures as “boarding houses, dressmakers, milliners, stores and shops of various kinds” (5). In addition, McDowall asserted that a large number of people who patronized prostitutes were seemingly respectable men whose names could be subsequently revealed. In the neo-Puritan tradition of scandalous exposure of crime, the report promised to strip naked the entire New York sex industry and to drag all crimes into the open on the scale McDowall’s contemporaries could not tolerate.

McDowall defended his strategy according to the basic principles of didactic sensationalism. As he wrote in the inaugural issue of *McDowall Journal*, “The evils must be shown to the public to interest them to remove the evils” (Jan 1833). He was dismayed by what he believed was churches’ reluctance to address such contentious

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<sup>55</sup> Timothy J. Gilfoyle, in *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*, surveyed different sources of other contemporary estimates that argued that anywhere between 4 to 41 percent of women were prostitutes.

issues as prostitution for fear of offending parishioners' sense of decency. He complained that ministers discouraged discussions of anything that could be deemed provocative and obscene: "A fastidious taste excludes from the pulpit sermon even a strong remark on the sin of debauchery." As a result, churches "ceased to teach men that licentiousness is sin," which, he alleged, contributed to proliferation of prostitution (*Magdalen Facts* 26). Young women, who lacked sufficient knowledge about any manifestations of vice except the glamorized tales of romantic authors, grew to become hapless victims of seducers. Young men, for their part, easily succumbed to sinful practices without fully understanding the repercussions of their actions. In McDowall's view, many sex crimes could be prevented if churches made better efforts to expose vice without fear of offending the public.<sup>56</sup>

McDowall was also eager to denounce bad foreign influence that, he was convinced, undermined traditional American values. He was, for example, absolutely intolerant of "liberal" religions and what he called "the relics of French infidels" (*Magdalen Facts* 23, 29). He called deists "Satan's confessed imps" (22). He described Thomas Paine as a heretic whose works were to be banned in colleges in order to keep

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<sup>56</sup> McDowall found himself amidst a contentious debate over the question whether young people, particularly young women, should be prevented from studying controversial topics. Townsend Stith, in *Thoughts on Female Educations* (1831), argued that it was not necessary for young women to study anything controversial because the "proper sphere of woman is the domestic circle" (16). Other writers timidly recommended a broader kind of education involving not only such subjects as literature and philosophy but also some training that could prepare women for exigencies of what they called "real" life. Almira H. Lincoln Phelps argued in *Lectures to Young Ladies* (Boston, 1833) that God did not intend people to "separate themselves from the world by ceasing to hold intercourse with it; we cannot believe that the Christian, as some zealots teach, is in the performance of his highest duty, by withdrawing from the world and burying himself in a cloister, in order to give his heart wholly to God and the service of religion." She encouraged young women to go out into the world where "you may do much towards healing the moral deceases of your thoughtless companions" (23-4). William A. Alcott's popular *Young Man's Guide* (1834) offers an example of how educators carefully balanced their thoughts on the subject. On the surface, the writer assumed the position of discouraging young men from inquiring into anything that had to do with vice (avoid theaters, licentious publications, etc.). At the same time the *Guide* included several chapters, fairly detailed, on different manifestations of vice, which suggests that Alcott would agree with McDowall's approach to education.

students “pure and undefiled” (23). McDowall also had little good to say about contemporary journalism, those “infidel and licentious daily and weekly papers” (28). He complained about the proliferation of obscene pamphlets, which he claimed could be found on virtually every corner. He railed against foreign books about “seducers, and debauchees, and rakes, and assignations, and seductions, and illicit amours,” which promoted licentiousness (27). Theaters, he went on echoing the Puritans and contemporary moralists, were even worse. They nourished corrupt sensuality that transformed every man into a seducer and every woman into an unwitting victim.

What was ironic, of course, was that McDowall’s provocative denunciation of licentiousness was thrown right back at him. *The Magdalen Report* caused what one contemporary described as “clamor and indignation” that rolled through the entire country (*Liberator*, Apr 5 1834). Following the appearance of *The Magdalen Report*, the city was buzzing with speculations about its truthfulness and the integrity of its authors. Within just a few months, there appeared several satirical tributes to McDowall and his fellow reformers: *Orthodox Bubbles* (1831), Peter Pendergrass’ *Magdalen Report: A Farce* (1831), and *The Phantasmagoria of New-York, A Poetical Burlesque upon a Certain Pamphlet, Written by a Committee of Notorious Fanatics, Entitled The Magdalen Report* (1831), not to mention countless newspaper articles, which turned this affair into a widely publicized scandal that lasted till McDowall’s death. As one observer commented on *The Magdalen Report*, it was “professedly designed to purify public morals, but so conducted that no intelligent man can read without being convinced that the main object of the publishers is to make money by feeding prurient interests” (*Workman’s Advocate*, Aug 3 1833). Some Catholic writers, annoyed at the rising tide of the anti-Catholic sentiment in the country, took the opportunity to attack McDowall’s campaign as one of the prime examples of Protestant imbecility. They labeled

*McDowall's Journal* “a filthy and stinky reservoir of corruption” and accused its author of financial machinations (*United States Catholic Miscellany*, Jul 26 1834).

Others resorted to vicious personal attacks. The authors of *Magdalen Report* were called fanatics, liars, and hypocrites. It was also suggested that McDowall's interests in prostitution betrayed his sexual proclivities. One contemporary cartoon, for example, depicted New York anti-prostitution reformers associated with McDowall as shameless womanizers who slept with prostitutes whom they purported to reform (Fig. 4.15). Suspicions of McDowall's duplicity were not well grounded but they made perfect sense at the time when so many religious figures were implicated in sex scandals. Every “modern saint,” as the author of *Phantasmagoria* wrote in his lampoon of McDowall, was simply a “Demi-devil plaster'd o'er with paint” (3). *Magdalen Report: A Farce*, in the same vein, satirized McDowall in the character of Zachariah Gundy, “a man of business” who claimed that he was an earnest reformer but could be seen around the town in the company of young women of questionable reputation. He had his pockets filled with copies of “Maddening” Report, which he distributed to curious young people all over the town. Its effect was both alarming and comical. Young women, who learned from the report that prostitutes “make money like smoke,” quitted their jobs and hit the streets in search of rich clientele or a suitable residence in a brothel. “There never was such a supply of youth and beauty before,” one procuress cheerfully chirped. Young men, for their part, treated the report as “the City chart, and the guide to the temple of Venus” (5). The report opened their eyes—but not to the dangers of licentiousness but to opportunities of random sexual encounters. “Before that came out,” one young man confessed, “I used ter stay home o'nights, just like a fool . . . . But ever since Mr. Gundy give me this Report . . . I've begun to enjoy myself” (3). Parents and elders moaned in disgust, hoping that Gundy would be “sewed up in a sack and thrown into the river” (10).



Figure 4.15: A caricature of corrupt New York reformers (1831).

The notion that exposure of licentiousness actually promoted licentiousness was not farfetched. In the aftermath of the scandal caused by *The Magdalen Report*, New Yorkers grew to be quite familiar with disingenuous reform publications that claimed to be moralistic in nature but in fact promoted the city's sex trade. The 1830s saw a rapid rise of the so-called sporting press, popular with young men in New York and other cities. Such weeklies as *The Owl*, *Ely's Hawk & Buzzard*, *Polyanthos*, *The Flash*, *The Libertine*, *The Rake*, *The New York Scorpion*, *The Monthly Cosmopolitan*, *Broadway Belle*, and *Venus Miscellany* celebrated the city's sexual decadence while disingenuously decrying the downfall of New Yorkers' morals. *The Libertine*, for example, amused its readers with biographies of famous prostitutes, tepid moralizing about the dangers of libertinism, and snapshots of the lives of promiscuous people. *The New York Scorpion* was also humorously insincere about its goals. Its editor claimed that his publication was

devoted to “the prevention and overthrow of VICE in its various forms and shades, [such] as Crimes, Misdemeanors, [and] Prostitution.”<sup>57</sup> As if following McDowall’s strategy, he promised to expose the city’s ill and “set forth FACTS without embellishment.” To this effect, he indulged his readers with “full particulars” about “cases of SEDUCTIONS, ELOPMENT AND ABDUCTIONS.” What was clear to everyone, of course, was that such papers did not at all intend to combat licentiousness but rather to promote the notion of sexual freedom.

Those who disliked *The Magdalen Report* could also point out that it inspired an entire genre of informative guides to the city’s sex trade. *Prostitution Exposed; or, A Moral Reform Directory* (1839), whose author wrote under the mischievous penname Butt Ender, reads like a flamboyant parody of *The Magdalen Report*. Butt Ender was hardly serious that his pamphlet was a reform publication, but he dedicated it to “The Ladies’ Reform Association,” which he praised for its efforts “to suppress the evil.” He gave the pamphlet a pretentiously serious title, which reads in full as follows: *Prostitution Exposed; or, A Moral Reform Directory: Laying Bare the Lives, Histories, Residences, Seductions, &c. Of the Most Celebrated Courtezans and Ladies of Pleasure of the City of New-York: Together with a Description of the Crime and its Effects: As also, of the Houses of Prostitution and their Keepers, Houses of Assignation, their Charges and Conveniences, and other Particulars Interesting to the Public* (1839). The public could, of course, overlook Butt Ender’s disingenuous moralizing. One wonders whether they even paid attention to the title, since the pamphlet’s title page was positioned right next to a provocatively erotic image of a young woman (Fig. 4.16). What was equally subversive was that the pamphlet offered a current list of brothels, with

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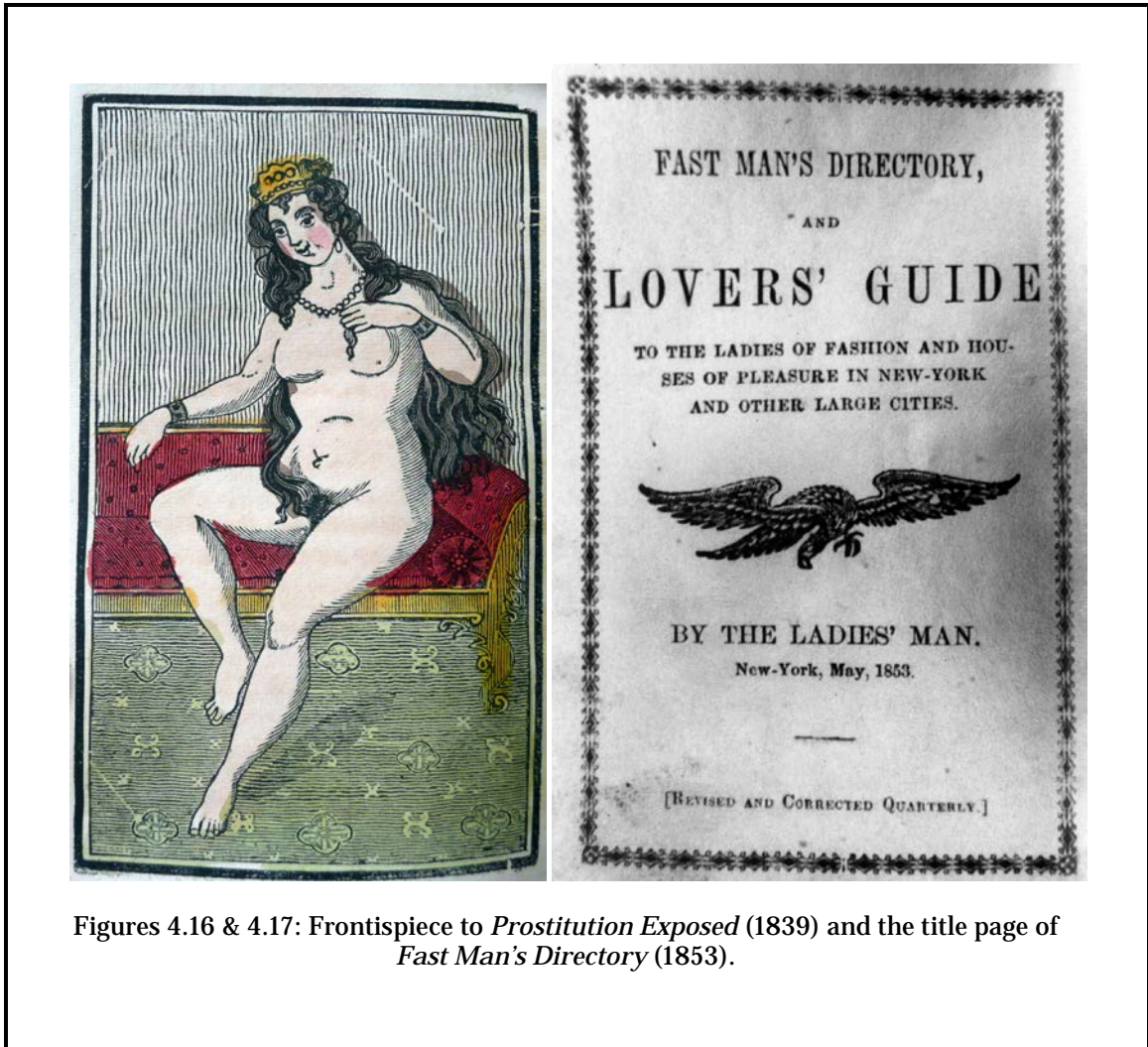
<sup>57</sup> Mottoes of sporting papers were meant to give the impression that their editors adhered to the principles of didactic sensationalism. *Albany Switch*: “From folly’s brow to tear the mask away, make vice himself his dirty face display.” *Dixon’s Polyanthos*: “We give each hydra in his den to know,—We buy no favor for we fear no foe.” *The Libertine* adopted Alexander Pope dictum “Vice is a monster of such hideous mien,—that to be hated needs to be seen.”

shorts comments about their inhabitants, and even abortionists. Other publications of this sort include *The Bachelor's Guide, and Widow's Manual; Containing Three Thousand One Hundred and Eighty-Six Names of Widow Ladies', and House Keepers in the Cities of New York and Brooklyn* (1842), George Thompson's *The G'hals of Boston; or, Pen and Pencil Sketches of Celebrated Courtezans* (1850), *Fast Man's Directory, and Lovers' Guide to the Ladies of Fashion and Houses of Pleasure in New-York and other Large Cities* (1853), *The Young Man's Guide to Pleasure in New York and All Other Cities* (ca. 1855), and George Ellington's *Women of New York; or, The Underworld* (1869).<sup>58</sup>

In 1834 the third Presbytery of New York, which licensed McDowall as a minister, warned him about his initiatives and suggested that he stop publishing his journal. He was charged with financial fraud and “other scandalous things, too bad to name” (McDowall, *Memoir* 311). Two years later the same court suspended him from the ministry. What is remarkable is that the court's decision was rather ambiguous. The majority in that court did not appreciate McDowall's methods of combating prostitution and his conduct as a minister. But they acknowledged that prostitution became a real problem in the city and “that the sin of lewdness is lamentably prevalent in our country.” They also expressed their concerns about “the existence and circulation of obscene and immodest prints, of novels and other works, adopted to break down the barriers of natural decency and chaste education, and the direct agency for seduction” (McDowall, *Memoir* 338). It appeared that the Presbytery was close to agreeing with McDowall, but its members chose to distance themselves from his initiatives. What they believed was that ministers should not go too far in their efforts to expose vice, “lest the very efforts to

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<sup>58</sup> With the exception of *The Young Man's Guide to Pleasure in New York and All Other Cities*, a reference to which can be found only in *Broadway Belle* (Jan 29, 1855), all other works mentioned here are housed in the American Antiquarian Society.



Figures 4.16 & 4.17: Frontispiece to *Prostitution Exposed* (1839) and the title page of *Fast Man's Directory* (1853).

prevent this vice should themselves become the occasion of its spread.”<sup>59</sup> The ambiguity of the Presbytery’s position was quite revealing. It was mindful of the social problems that befell the country and was willing to address it, but it could not endorse provocative methods of combating them.

When the Presbytery’s decision was reversed by the synod just several months later, McDowall was only weeks away from his death brought about by the trials and bad

<sup>59</sup> The records of the trial appeared, among other places, in “McDowall’s Trial” (*New York Evangelist*, Nov 5 and 12, 1836) and McDowall’s own publication, *Charges Preferred Against New York Benevolent Society, and the Auditing Committee, in 1835 and 1836, by J. R. McDowall, in the Sun and Transcript, Answered and Refuted by Himself!! In his Own Journal!!! In the Year 1833* (New York, 1836). See also Larry Whitaker’s *Seduction, Prostitution, and Moral Reform in New York, 1830-1860* (New York: Garland, 1997), which offers an extensive survey of McDowall’s career and legal troubles.

health. His supporters rallied to praise McDowall as a true martyr. Mary S. Tappan composed a moving poem (“acquitted he stood / In the eyes of all that were holy and good”). One of his obituaries praised him for “the promotion of purity of morals” and “the boldness of his course” (*The Ohio Observer*, Dec 22, 1836). But McDowall’s acquittal did not dispel his notoriety, which followed him to the grave. As his obituary in *The Liberator* put it, he was, more than anything else, a radical iconoclast who was “hastened to a premature grave by Ecclesiastical oppression” and “a cowardly, shrinking, time-serving, and popularity seeking priesthood” (“M’Dowall,” Jan 07 1837). The obituary emphasized not only McDowall’s achievements but also his rebelliousness, praising his provocative methods which many other activists would later adopt for their purposes. But was his campaign successful? Even his sympathizers disagreed. Lewis Tappan, who claimed to the end that “McDowall’s labors were not in vain,” thought that his “zeal and courage were greater than his judgment” (119, 114). Perhaps the most telling sign of McDowall’s controversy was that it was a long time before another man would get involved in reforming prostitutes.

Overall, McDowall made a bigger impact as a sensationalist writer rather than a reformer. His provocative methods, which relied on the neo-Puritan tradition of sensationalism, inadvertently drew the public’s attention to various contradictions of that tradition and helped fuel a debate about its legitimacy. Furthermore, the controversy surrounding McDowall’s campaign rekindled Americans’ mistrust of politicians, religious figures, and even reformers at the time when reforms were much needed. If anything, this trend made scandals in the antebellum period even more colorful.

## CHAPTER V

### EARLY MODERN CRIME LITERATURE

“We need not send our Curiosity (or our curiosity us,) to seek Tygers and Monsters in *Africa*; for *Europe* hath too many, who are so cruel and inhumane, not only to imbrue, but to imbathe themselves in the innocent blood of their Christian brethren.”

John Reynolds  
*The Triumphs of Gods Revenge*, 1621

“The prosperity of Crime is but an ordeal to which Providence would expose Virtue, it is like unto the lightening, whose traitorous brilliances but for an instant embellish the atmosphere, in order to hurl into the death’s very deeps the luckless one they have dazzled.”

The Marquis de Sade  
*Justine, or, Good Conduct Well Chastised*, 1791

**Précis:** As we are turning our attention to the subject of crime, one of the most popular themes in sensationalism, we have to acknowledge that American crime literature can be better understood in the transatlantic context. Various forms of European crime literature, which started to proliferate with the invention of the printing press, established a few enduring literary conventions that ultimately influenced writers on both sides of the Atlantic. This chapter highlights some basic characteristics of those conventions and their evolution. It begins by emphasizing the religious and didactic nature of the earliest forms of European crime literature, while at the same time demonstrating its growing diversity, which was fueled by writers’ desire to adopt the subject of crime not only to the changing social realities but also to their readers’ voyeuristic proclivities.

## RELIGIOUS ORIGINS OF EARLY MODERN CRIME LITERATURE

Excessive fascination with crime is certainly not a uniquely American phenomenon. As one English writer commented in 1761, his compatriots were simply addicted to reading crime reports, execution accounts, and other publications which can be loosely characterized as crime literature. In fact, he claimed that his compatriot's captivation with crime actually bordered on obsession: "not only the Crime, but [also] the Connexions and most private History of the unfortunate Delinquents, are eagerly enquired into, and become the subjects of every Conversation. To be ignorant of, or to have nothing new to offer upon these Topicks, almost excludes us from Society" (*The Authentic Trial, and Memoirs of Isaac Darkin* 3). He was also amazed (or appalled) by the astonishing diversity of English crime literature, which went far beyond simple crime reportage. Popular writers fervently competed with each other to satisfy readers' insatiable interest in crime and indulged them with shocking tales of human depravity that had absolutely no social nor educational value. What was even worse, he thought, was that such overly sensational works eroded moral values and justice:

too commonly, numberless Falsehoods are invented, every Particular that comes to our Knowledge exaggerated . . . Hence also arise the different Representations, which are made both of [criminals'] Offence and Character: Some esteeming them proper Subjects for raillery, draw as it were, a pleasing Picture of an *Hero in Iniquity*, lessening thereby in their Audience, an Abhorrence of Vice: Others magnifying each little Error and Frailty, are guilty of the blackest Injuries, by anticipating the Decrees of Justice, while they seem to promote a Love of Virtue. (3)

Indeed, the variety of "different Representations" of crime in print was truly amazing. By his day, crime literature grew into a restive genre that encompassed all sorts of

sensationalist publications that exploited the subject of crime for didactic and voyeuristic purposes. But was this trend alarming? Was crime literature considered as dangerous as he believed it was?

What might be surprising about the earliest forms of crime literature, which appeared almost simultaneously with the printing press, is that they actually owed their origin to the writers who believed that the subject of crime could be used for ostensibly legitimate purposes. Its growing popularity had two main reasons that ultimately shaped the genre. First, crime publications always reflected important social and religious issues of the day and were marketed as well-intentioned didactic publications. In this respect, early modern crime literature exploited readers' deep concerns about their faith, the safety of their communities, and the future of the Christian world at large. Such concerns notwithstanding, however, literature about crime gained much popularity because it ultimately went beyond the confines of didacticism and appealed to readers' voyeuristic fascination with the grotesque, extraordinary, and exotic. To take this point further, what crime writers quickly grew to understand was that their success depended largely on the ability to balance the didactic and voyeuristic elements in their works.

To exemplify that balance between didacticism and voyeurism we can briefly turn our attention to Hieronymus Bosch's triptych "The Last Judgment" (ca. 1482), a stunning painting depicting the degeneration of the human race and sinners' punishment (Fig. 5.1). The left portion of the triptych recalls man's fall from grace in paradise, which is meant to reinforce the notion of man's criminal propensities. The central part depicts Jesus's judgment of the sinners, while the right one illustrates the punishment that awaits them. The work's didactic message is unavoidably clear. Crime is an aberration of God's order and criminals are always punished. The triptych is crowned with the image of Jesus Christ as a judge, which is meant to remind us that everything in this world is subjugated to God's laws. Lest the viewer is dismissive about the tired

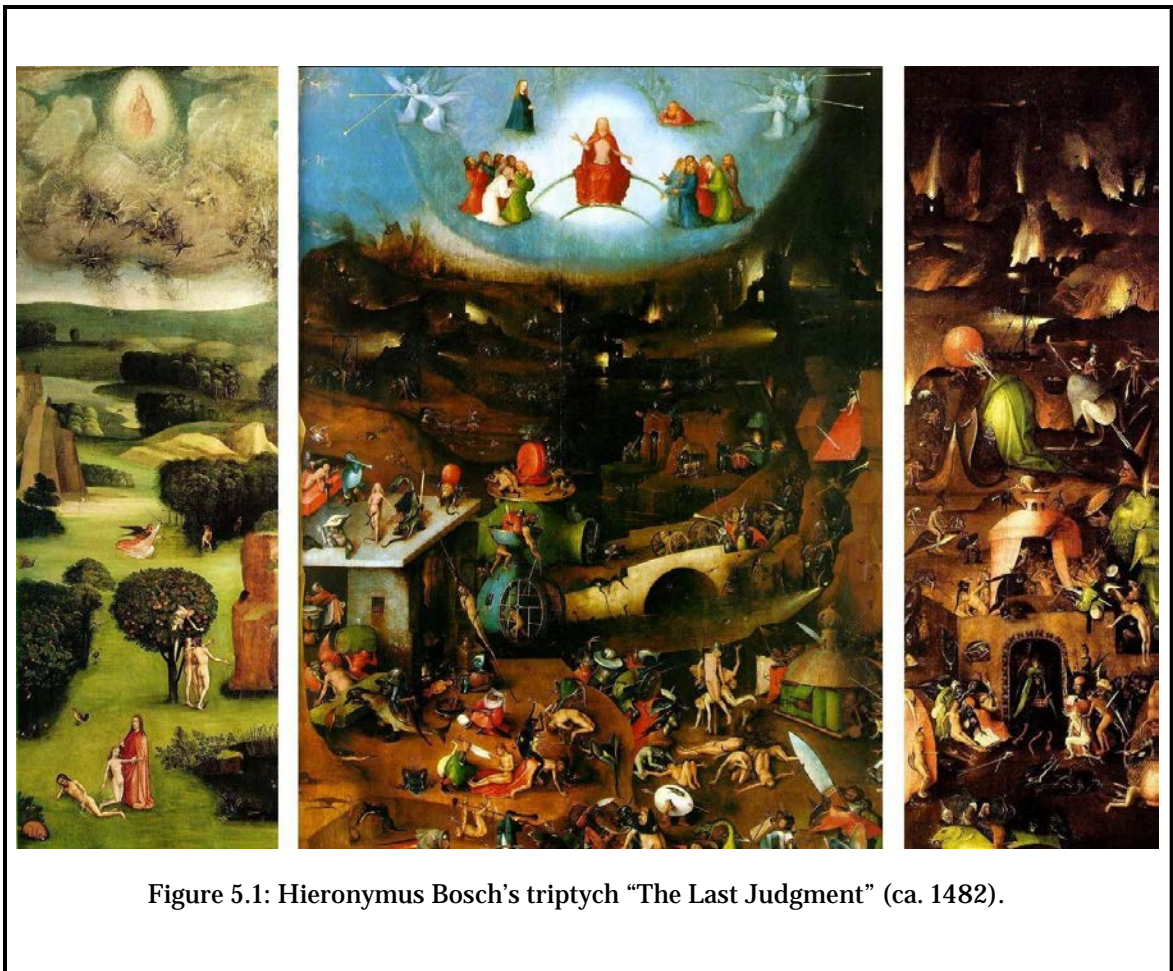


Figure 5.1: Hieronymus Bosch's triptych "The Last Judgment" (ca. 1482).

religious notion of God's justice, Bosch made sure to emphasize this message in the most shocking manner. "The Last Judgment" relentlessly barrages the viewer with awful images of sinners' torture and horrors of hell. This theme is quite typical in Christian didactic art. What makes "The Last Judgment" unique, however, is the painting's sensationalist and visual excess. It is filled with details whose ruthlessly shocking character and alluring oddness turn it into a visual feast. It cannot help but impress us with its imaginativeness and originality, which allows this work to transcend the limits of simple didacticism. Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (1503-4) offers an even more stunning image of hell: sinners horded for eternal damnations, rats devouring people, and numerous odd punishments which the doomed have to endure (Fig. 5.2). These details are so weird that one cannot help but wonder whether Bosch wanted his

viewers to appreciate the didactic message of his works or their colorful visual effects.

The answer is rather complicated. It is certainly possible to say that the triptychs' didactic message is meant to be reinforced by its stunning imagery, which suggests that the paintings' showiness is entirely subjugated to their moralistic message. But we can also say that the visual splendor of "The Last Judgment" and "The Garden of Earthly Delights" actually eclipses their didacticism. The triptychs can be enjoyed as simply stunning and complex works. It is possible to admire them without any regard for their religious message.

In general terms, early modern crime literature was strictly religious in nature. In fact, it is

rather difficult to draw a line between Christian morality tales about sinners, which were popular in medieval Europe, and early forms of didactic crime literature in the sixteenth century. The Bible, which is filled with stories about God's punishment of disobedient people and criminals, was naturally the most important and readily available source for

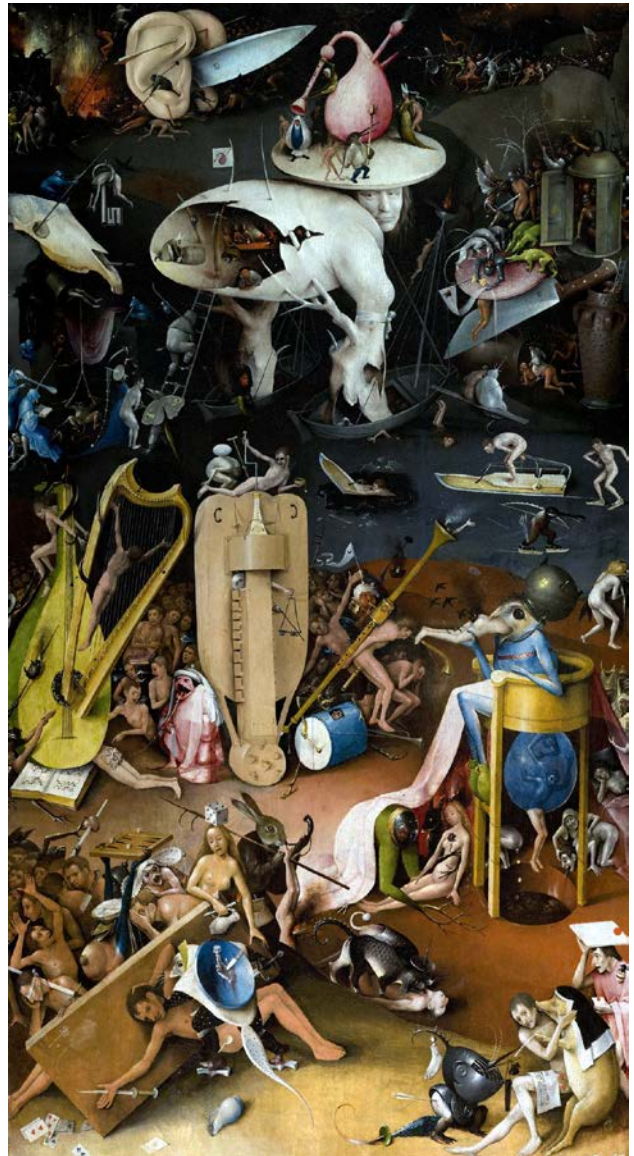


Figure 5.2: A detail in Hieronymus Bosch's triptych "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (1503-4).

many preachers, artists, and writers in early Modern Europe. They wholeheartedly accepted Christian principles of sensationalist moralizing, according to which provocative imagery (and examples of horrific crimes) could be used to get audiences' attention and manipulate their emotions if it helped convey important religious ideas.

The origin of popular crime literature can be traced to didactic crime reports, sermons, and public performances, which became popular in Europe, most notably in France, Germany, and England, in the sixteenth century. In their most basic form, such reports described various crimes and culprits' punishments as a way to promote people's appreciation for religion and law. Aimed at a wide audience, the reports were published as short pamphlets and broadsides, which were often ornamented with crude woodcuts and catchy titles that emphasized the content's horrific nature and its educational value. As the title of one pamphlet of this sort suggests, reading about "strange and inhumaine murders" was meant to emphasize "the odiousnesse of murther" and offer an example of "the vengeance which God inflicteth on murtherers." The pamphlet's full title, which reflected its author's claim that his work promoted religious causes, read as follows: *Sundrye Strange and Inhumaine Murthers, Lately Committed. The First of a Father that Hired a Man to Kill Three of his Children neere to Ashford in Kent: The Second of Master Page of Plymouth, Murthered by the Consent of his Owne Wife: With the Strange Discoverie of Sundrie other Murthers. Wherein is Described the Odiousnesse of Murther, with the Vengeance which God Inflicteth on Murtherers* (1591). To emphasize the pamphlet's didactic character, each of the two stories included in it ends with a reminder that readers are not supposed to enjoy them for their titillating details but have to think about serious issues and heed its warning to "avoid the danger of shedding of innocent blood, and feare the iudgement of God which continually followeth wilfull murderers" (n.p.). In the words of another crime writer, who penned a riveting report about a matricide, his publication is meant to be read strictly as "an example both for

parents, to be careful how they bring up their children in the feare of God . . . and for youth, to take heed that they eschew riotous and lewd company” (*A Spectacle for Vsurers* 11).

This approach was fairly common not only in England but throughout the Western Europe. In Germany, as Joy Wiltenburg shows in her study, clerics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries routinely published pamphlets about shocking crimes and cataclysms. To point out a particularly notable example, the Swiss pastor Johann Jakob Wick (1522-1588) composed as many nine hundred crime pamphlets and broadsides of this sort. Popular German writers, for their part, invented the peculiar genre of the crime ballad. Published as broadsides, such ballads dwelled on exceptionally sensational crimes, catastrophes, and other disturbing occurrences under the guise of religious moralizing. The ballads were sold by itinerant performers who staged outdoor public shows to promote their works, which greatly contributed to their popularity.<sup>60</sup> French crime writers, as we will see shortly, were equally imaginative and prolific.

One of the most important aspects of sensationalist moralizing, which is quite evident in the early modern crime literature, is that various manifestations of criminal behavior had to be treated not as isolated and ordinary occurrences but as signs of negative social trends or even cosmic struggle between God and Satan. It is understandable that many crime writers who wanted to enhance the social value of their works followed the common strategy of transforming ordinary crime reports into alarming tales that emphasized the magnitude of the issues which crimes supposedly brought to the surface. This approach was highly effective. If one did not care about some random murder, one was surely alarmed when he was forced to understand what that act of violence signified.

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<sup>60</sup> Tom Cheesman’s *Shocking Ballads Picture Show: German Popular Literature and Cultural History* (New York: Berg, 1994) offers a detailed survey of the genre from its origins in the sixteenth century to its various manifestations as late as the twentieth century.



Figure 5.3: A woodcut from a crime pamphlet: Satan incites people to murder (1614).

It was common to argue, for example, that the rise of crime, which was notably exaggerated, revealed what was perceived as a deep religious crisis that engulfed entire Europe—something every Christian was meant to find disturbing. Some pamphlets, such as *The Cruel Murtherer, or the Treacherous Neighbour* (1673), argued that many crimes revealed Satan's intrusion in people's affairs. Others even claimed that the crimes they described foreshadowed the end of times. The example of *A Horrible Creuel and Bloody Murther* (1614) is typical. The pamphlet was inspired by a bad but by no means extraordinary crime—two young men killed their master with an ax. For the pamphlet's

author, however, this was not a simple murder. It was nothing other than a sign of Satan's malicious activity. This point was so important that the pamphlet's cover actually featured an image of Satan inciting the young men to commit murder (Fig. 5.3). The pamphlet opened with a disturbing assertion that this crime was one of many signs of impending apocalypse. "It is old decrepit age wherein wee liue," he wrote. The world is

limping on hir last legges, whereas impieties, blasphemies, iniquittes, villanies, thousandes more of hell-hatched enormities haue gotten the upper hand, where the sweet seeming baytes of Sathan leades men . . . to commit all horrid and damnable trespasses, and transgressions against the Deuine maiestie of the omnipotent and eternall God. (n.p.)

Such sensationalist claims were meant to be deeply shocking in that they created a rather terrifying picture of the world permeated by dark forces and in which no one was safe. But even such gloomy pamphlets were utterly didactic in that they were meant to awaken people's appreciation for religion. This is why many works of this sort sound hopeless at first but ultimately end with hopeful calls for spiritual awakening. Take, for example, John Reynolds's collection of crime stories titled *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge against the Crying and Execrable Sinne of . . . Murther* (1621). Its author went out of his way to shock his readers, arguing that the proliferation of crime reflected Europeans' decadence and growing atheism, which led him to conclude that he lived in the "last and worst dayes of the world" (a3). To make this point, Reynolds compiled a lengthy list of examples that run from the distant past to his own time, pointing out that crimes were becoming amazingly frequent and increasingly vicious. And yet Reynolds's view of the world was not entirely negative. No matter how shocking his stories were, in each of them one could discern the reassuring presence of God, who unfailingly punished all sinners. This point was important because it assured readers that the world is orderly rather than chaotic. The design of the book's cover captures this idea by depicting the

figure of divine justice overlooking various trials and executions of criminals (Fig. 5.5). Disturbing as Reynolds's stories are, they were meant to encourage readers to be more appreciative of their faith and embrace "the rules of Christian fortitude and piety" (a7).

#### VOYEURISTIC ASPECTS OF EARLY MODERN CRIME LITERATURE

Their didacticism notwithstanding, many crime reports published in early modern Europe were meant to be appreciated not only as morality tales but also as unusual stories. Simply put, they appealed to readers' fascination with the weird. The moralistic pamphlet *A Spectacle for Vsurers and Succors of Poore Folkes Bloud* (1606), which we encountered earlier as an example of religious didacticism, is in fact a telling example of how crime writers at that time skillfully balanced their works' religious and voyeuristic appeal (Fig. 5.4). The pamphlet was apparently meant to emphasize God's righteousness and his hatred of crime and greed. One of the stories included in it is about a mean French usurer who refuses to help a starving. On the surface, the story is simplistically didactic. The usurer, who for a long time "sucked, gnawed and deuoured the good of very many poore people," is in turn "gnawed" by rats (5). But unsophisticated as the story is, we should not ignore the author's undeniable interest in the strangeness of this case. How often does one get to hear a story about a man eaten alive by rats? It can be assumed that many readers who bought the pamphlet were interested not so much in its moralistic message but the story's weirdness.

It is understandable that quite many crime reports in that period focused on unusually shocking and bizarre cases, thus hoping to spark readers' sense of curiosity and their voyeuristic interest in crime. What was outrageous about the pamphlet titled *Discours admirable des meurtes et assassinates de nouveau commis par un nommé Chriseman* (1582) was that its culprit killed as many as nine hundred and sixty four



Figure 5.4: A greedy usurer gnawed by rats (1606).

people. Another French pamphlet, *Histoire tragique d'un gentilhomme Savoyard* (1605), reported the bizarre case of the man who forced his children to kill his adulterous wife and then killed them as well.<sup>61</sup> English pamphleteers followed the same strategy and were drawn to the most unusual cases they could find. *A Most Execrable and Barbarous Mvrdre Done by an East-Indian Devil* (1642) recalled a brutal massacre aboard an English vessel

committed by a native of Java (pictured on a cover as a flamboyantly dressed savage). *A Wonder of Wonders* (1651) tells an extraordinary story of an innocent woman who, after she was executed for the crime she did not commit, miraculously came back to life. *The Bloody Husband, and Crvell Neighbour* (1653) is notable for the viciousness of the crime it describes and the ingenuity of the man who committed it; not only did he brutally murder his wife and neighbor, he tried to feign insanity by killing a few dogs and

<sup>61</sup> These reports are included in Maurice Lever's anthology *Canards Sanglants: Naissance Du Fait Divers* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

smearing their blood on his face. The hyperbolicism of such accounts reminds us that crime writers were forced to compete against each other by inventing and reporting unusually provocative stories. They did not spare superlatives to call their works the most horrid, most bizarre, most barbarous examples of human depravity.

The voyeuristic trend in crime literature became at first apparent in Germany and France, where writers and artists were amazingly creative in their strategies of turning crime into art. German crime ballads, for example, became immensely popular in the sixteenth century due to their stimulating content and their publishers' promotional efforts. As a rule, such broadsides included visually stunning woodcuts and tableaux. The broadsides were sold by itinerant performers who staged outdoor public shows featuring extravagant and provocative picture screens. Such shows charmed the audience with their theatricality the way crime ballads fascinated readers with astonishing stories. To quote the opening lines of one such ballad, which told a story of a blasphemer's gruesome death: "Pay heed, you Christians; stand still; / what wondrous things / I now want to perform to you" (Cheesman 12).

Voyeuristic elements in French crime literature were apparent almost from its inception. Its origins can be traced to the emergence of cheap news reports, or *occasionnels*, in the late fifteenth century. They were published as broadsides and contained news about particularly noteworthy events, including war reports, miracles, and crimes. Entrepreneurial publishers sold their broadsides on the streets through peddlers. *Canards*, as such publications came to be known, had amazingly catchy titles and often featured bluntly provocative woodcuts. Crime was understandably one of the most popular subjects in *canards*, whose titles, printed in gigantic letters, beckoned passersby with a familiar sensationalist vocabulary: *tragique*, *barbare*, *cruanté*, *horrible*, *inhumaine*, etc. As a rule, *canards* purported to be didactic; more often than not, they started and ended with some religious moralizing. What mattered to the

readers, however, were the stories themselves.<sup>62</sup> What they found amazing about *canards* was their sensationalist mixture of realism, hyperbole, and weirdness.<sup>63</sup>

Moralists who wrote about crime in strictly didactic terms often lamented the fact that crime literature was becoming more and more sensational, and that it was even read solely for pleasure. They were right. The seventeenth-century crime literature was clearly affected by what can be described as anti-didactic trend. An increasing number of authors who wrote about crime kept religious moralizing to a minimum. Some works even lacked any religious references at all, thus allowing readers to look at them as simply interesting stories.<sup>64</sup> Thus the author of *Fair Warnings to Murderers of Infants* (1692), who insisted on the utmost seriousness of his work, was utterly dismayed that some people could read his pamphlet for any reason other than the moral lesson it was meant to convey. His comments give us a good idea of the emerging contrast between

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<sup>62</sup> As Maurice Lever comments in his study, “Preambulé et conclusion n’existent . . . que pour justifier l’auteur de s’être abondonné au plaisir de conter—et le lecteur au plaisir de lire. Autrement dit, la fin justifierait le moyens et le sermon lumineux suffirait à innocenter le récit” (23).

<sup>63</sup> For the origins and development of the genre, see Maurice Lever’s *Canards Sanglants: Naissance Du Fait Divers* (Paris: Fayard, 1993) and Jean-Pierre Seguin’s *Nouvelles à Sensation: Canards Du Dix-Neuvieme Siecle* (Paris: A. Colin, 1959).

<sup>64</sup> Examples of such pamphlets include *A Strange and Horrible Relation of a Bloody and Inhumane Murther Committed on the Body of a Jewish VVoman, by the Command of her Father a Jewish Priest. Or the Bloody Servant, Being a Full and True Account of the Tryal, Condemnation, and Execution, of the Barbarious Murther Lately Committed in Shropshire by One John Adams, Who Cut the Throat First of Anne Harris, His Masters Wife, and afterwards of Sarah Harris Her Daughter, with a Knife (as He Said) Given him for that Purpose by the Devil, and Then Having Robb'd Them of What Mony They Had, Set Fire on the House* (London, 1674) and *A True and Perfect Account of the Examination, Confession, Tryal, Condemnation and Execution of Joan Perry, and her Two Sons, John & Richard Perry, for the Supposed Murder of William Harrison, Gent. Being One of the Most Remarkable Occurrences which Hath Happened in the memory of man, Sent in a Letter (by Sir T.O. of Burton, in the County of Gloucester, Kt., and One of His Majesties Justices of the Peace) to T.S. Dr. of Physick in London; Likewise Mr. Harrison's own Account How He was Conveyed into Turkey and There Made a Slave above Two Years; and then his Master VVich Bought him There, Dying, Hovv he Made his Escape, and VVhat Hardship he Endured, VVho at Last (through the Providence of God) Returned to England, while He was Supposed to be Murder'd; Here Having been his Man-Servant Arraigned (who Falsly Impeached his own Mother and Brother as Guilty of the Murder of his Master) They were all Three Arraign'd, Convicted, and Executed* (London, 1676).

didactic and voyeuristic sensationalism in the seventeenth-century crime literature:

*It would grieve a Man to think how many's Curiosity will tempt them to buy this Paper; how few's Consideration will led them to make useful Application of it to themselves; how more will, through a vainly censorious Wit, charge the Publishing this Letter, as a Trick to pick Pockets; how few's Wisdom will conduct them to fall in with the direct Tendency it hath to enrich and ennoble their Minds; whilst most, it's to be feared, read such things with no more concern, than Persons in Health, read Quack-Doctors Bills, and make no better use of them. Yet he that hath an ear to hear let him hear; this Letter speaks by strong Consequence at least, to the highest concerns of Mankind in general, it lays open Mens greatest Mistakes about, and misconducts of them. (n.p.)*

Did readers share the author's "*highest concerns*"? It is hard to say, but what we can well imagine is that some readers found his pamphlet interestingly shocking. It featured an account of the culprit, whose crime, infanticide, was awfully scandalous. What is more, it included the criminal's heart-wrenching confession (which was probably made up by the publisher) to spice up the pamphlet. One suspects that the author's denunciation of "curiosity" about awful crimes like this was not entirely genuine.

The growing variety of crime literature can be explained in terms of the increasingly voyeuristic sensibility of its readers. While early crime reports were fairly formulaic and stylistically uniform, crime literature of later period, under pressure from the readers who were not particularly interested in moralizing, developed into a set of remarkably variegated genres. They included not only broadsides and pamphlets but also plays, crime collections, and other publications that allowed readers with different interests to appreciate crime stories any way they wanted. To use the example of *A Full and the Truest Narrative of the Most Horrid, Barbarous and Unparalleled Murder,*

*Committed on the Person of John Knight* (1657), such works mixed vivid accounts of a crime, confessions, trial records, didactic essays, and other materials to make them more appealing to readers. The author of *The Lives of Sundry Notorious Villains* (1678), in his desire to outrival his competitors, even went so far as to combine documentary materials with crime fiction. What this approach entailed was that readers could choose for themselves whether to focus on the didactic or voyeuristic aspects of crime reports. New forms of crime literature offered something for everyone.

#### THE *HISTOIRE TRAGIQUE* AND CRIME COLLECTIONS

The increasing diversity of crime literature was particularly noticeable in the rising popularity of the works which can be characterized as crime collections. Crime collections are different from crime reports in that they are fairly long and combine diverse materials, such as crime reports, documents, sermons, and short stories, to appeal to a wide audience. English writers adopted the genre from the continent.

One of the early manifestations of this genre was the *histoire tragique*, or *horrific tales*. They were published as collections of provocative stories that emphasized the criminal propensity of human nature. The genre was inaugurated in France in 1559, when Pierre Boaistuau (1517-66), a renowned French humanist, translated a few gory tales by the Italian writer Matteo Bandello (ca. 1485-1561). The translation sparked enough interest in such stories to prompt other French writers to publish their own translations (and variations) of Bandello's works, whose popularity quickly spread to England (Shakespeare adopted some of them in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twelfth Night*) and Germany, where publishers brought out several collections inspired by Bandello.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Alexander Košenina's "Schiller's Poetics of Crime" (*Schiller: National Poet – Poet of Nations*. Ed. Nicholas Martin. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006: 201-217) refers to the following

In the early seventeenth century, the genre was revolutionized with the appearance of François de Rosset's *Histoires tragiques de notre temps* (1614), in which he expanded the scope of typical *histoires tragiques* by turning his attention to crime stories from contemporary sources. To appeal to as many readers as possible, Rosset's strategy was to discover the most unusual, convoluted, and shocking reports in recent history and invest them with some sense of extraordinariness. Among his *histoires tragiques*, we find stories about incestuous siblings, parricide, bizarre accidents, murderous priests, black magic, and even demons impersonating people. Typical chapter titles in his book include "De la cruauté d'un frère exercée contre une sienne soeur pour une folle passion d'amour," "Des horribles excès commis par une ieune religieuse à instigation du diable," and "D'une demon qui apparoist en forme de Damoiselle au Lieutenant du Chevalier du Guet . . ." As we can see from these examples, it was by combing realistic, extraordinary, and sometimes even fantastic components, did *Histoires tragiques de notre temps* become so tremendously popular; in the century that followed, the book went through at least thirty five editions. It appears that readers found crime literature interesting when they could indulge their fascination with the bizarre while, at the same time, appreciating the stories' realism.

This strategy is also apparent in the works of Jean-Pierre Camus, a well-known religious figure and perhaps the most prolific seventeenth-century French writer. They include such sensationalist titles as *L'Amphithéâtre sanglant, où sont représentées plusieurs actions tragiques de nostre temps* (1630), *Les Spectacles d'horreur, où se descouvrent plusieurs tragiques effects de nostre siecle* (1630), and *Les Rencontres funestes, ou Fortunes infortunées de nostre temps* (1644). While Camus was admittedly

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German adaptations and translations of the *histoire tragique*: Martin Zeiler's *Theatrum tragicum* (1628), Georg Philipp Harsdörffer's *Der Grosse Schau-Platz jämmerlicher Mord-Geschichte* (1649-51), Johann Merck's *Trauer-Shau-Bühne* (1669), Erasmus Francisci's *Hoher Trauer-Saal* (1669), Jean Nicola de Parival's *Sinnreiche / Kurtzweilige und Traurige Geschichte* (1671), Johann Samuel Adamis's *Theatrum Tragicum* (1695), and Johann Christoph Beer's *Neu-eröffnete Trauer-Bühne* (1708-31).

influenced by his predecessors, particularly Francois de Belleforest and de Rosset, his works were remarkable in the range of the cases Camus discovered and a perfect balance of didacticism and voyeurism.<sup>66</sup> As a religious moralist, Camus did his best not to let his readers forget that the purpose of his books, which indulged readers with descriptions of all sorts of crimes, was to promote religious causes. In *Les Spectacles d'horreur*, he compared himself to a surgeon who was compelled to bleed his patients in order to cure them.<sup>67</sup> On another occasion, he justified the sensationalist excess of his works by insisting that his strategy was not different from that of politicians in ancient Rome, where bloody spectacles were promoted to “imprimer dans les esprits des spectateurs l'horreur du mal” (*L'Amphitheatre sanglant* n.p.). But overall, the moralistic aspect of Camus' works never outweighed their appeal as unusually grotesque and provocative tales, which he wrote with notable literary care.

Jean-Nicolas de Parival's *Histoires facétieuses et moralles . . . Avec quelques histoires tragiques* (1663) offers an even better example of that by the middle of the seventeenth century the proponents of this genre were turning away from the didacticism of their predecessors. The pocket-sized volume of *Histoires facétieuses et moralles* was clearly intended for superficial readers who bought the book for the sake of its curious anecdotes, which form the bulk of the volume. Thirty eight short *histoires tragiques* included in the book were apparently meant to attract the reader with their eclectic variety rather than moralizing. It is also noteworthy that Parival's crime stories appeared alongside various anecdotes, which suggests that he used *histoires tragiques* as

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<sup>66</sup> In the preface to *L'Amphitheatre sanglant*, Camus wrote: “En cela ie marche après les pas de Francois de Belleforest & de Francois de Rosset qui ont auparauant moy escrit des Histires tragiques avec un success assez heureux. Mais si i'imate leur forme, ie ne touché nullement a leur matiere” (n.p.).

<sup>67</sup> “Les bons Chirurgiens guerissent en maniant le playes des blessez, & en tirant le sang des veines des maladies. Nous les imitons en tirant de bons exemples des actions les plus horribles que nous fournisse le grand theatre du monde” (*Les Spectacles d'horreur* n.p.).

objects of curiosity.<sup>68</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the scope of French crime literature was enlarged by other collections, particularly Francois Gayot de Pitaval's *Les Causes célèbres et intéressants*, the first volume of which appeared in 1734. It was followed, in the next decade, with nineteenth more volumes. As a lawyer, Pitaval was primarily interested in the cases which were remarkable from legal standpoint. His books were fairly expensive for the general public, which limited his readership, but Pitaval's approach inspired a number of imitations that appealed to readers' fascination with real-life crime. Most notable was Moyne Des Essarts's journal *Les Causes célèbres, curieuses et intéressantes de toutes les cours souveraines du Royaume*. Published between 1773 and 1789, it totaled ninety eight volumes with accounts of almost seven hundred court cases. The journal was fairly accessible in its cost and content; it included the cases involving not only rich and famous but also common people, which contributed to the journal's popularity among readers of classes. Pitaval was also known in England, where Charlotte Smith published an adaptation of *Les Causes célèbres et intéressants* under the title *The Romance of Real Life* (1787). In what reminds us about the voyeuristic trend in crime literature, Smith made sure to get rid of "unnecessary details" and legal digressions Pitaval was fond of and spiced up his boring style to turn the book into a collection of amusing crime stories.

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, when France went through a period of social turmoil, an increasing number of French crime collections started to reflect the anti-monarchical sentiment of the new period. The author of *Les Crimes des reines de*

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<sup>68</sup> For a more detailed survey of the *histoire tragique* genre, see Stéphan Ferrari's "Histoire tragique et grande histoire: rencontre de deux genres" (*Dalhousie French Studies* 65 [2003]: 18-35) and A. M. Schmidt's "Histoires tragiques" (*Etudes sur le XVIIe siècle*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1967: 247-59). For a discussion of fantastic elements in *histoires tragiques*, see the "L'intrusion du surnaturel dans l'*Histoire tragique*" chapter in Marianne Closson's *L'imaginaire démoniaque en France (1550-1650): Genèse de la littérature fantastique* (Genève: Droz, 2000).

*France* (1792), for example, exploited the public's fascination with the corruption of the aristocracy and compiled a series of colorful stories about the crimes committed at the court. Finally Louis-Pierre Manuel, a radical revolutionary and prolific writer, penned several collections with such titles as *La police de Paris dévoilée* (1789), *La Bastille dévoilée, ou, recueil de pièces authentiques pour servir à son histoire* (1789), and *Histoire secrète des plus célèbres prisonniers de la Bastille* (1790), which served as a basis for the English edition of his works, titled *Anecdotes Recorded by the Police of Paris Of All the Affairs of Gallantry Which Have Occurred in That Metropolis for Several Years Past. With Biographical Sketches of the Parisian Women of Pleasure* (1794). It is evident these authors, whose works focused on current issues, wanted to invest them with some sense of social relevance. Most of them, however, were read for their entertaining value.

English crime collections, whose authors were undoubtedly influenced by the literary developments on the continent, started to appear in the sixteenth century, shortly after the success of the first *histories tragiques* in France. Thomas Beard led the way when he published *The Theatre of Gods Iudgements: or, a Collection of Histories out of Sacred, Ecclesiasticall, and Prophane Authours Concerning the Admirable Iudgements of God vpon the Transgressours of his Commandements* (1597), an adaptation of Jean de Chassanion's *Histoires memorables des grans et merueilleux jugemens et punitions de Dieu* (1585).

Beard's goal was to collect the most provocative examples of human propensity for crime and reveal what he called "an horrible overflow of all euils" in the world. He did that by ransacking not only the works of other writers, going as far back as the scriptures and Roman antiquity, but also contemporary crime reports from England. This strategy made the book's content amazingly diverse. *The Theatre of Gods Iudgements* covered almost the entire human history, starting with the destruction of Sodom and ending with

the death of Christopher Marlowe in 1593, only to conclude, with a histrionic flare, that “the world seemeth truly to be nothing else but an ocean full of hideous monsters, or a thicke Forrest full of theeves and robbers, or some horrible wilderness wherein the inhabitants of the earth, being sauage and vnnaturall, void of sence and reason, are transformed into brute beasts” (2-3).

To justify his interest in crime, Beard resorted to the all-too-familiar argument that knowledge of vice was simply essential for appreciation of virtue. This strategy was fairly common among contemporary English writers who were interested in provocative subjects. John Milton offered a similar argument in his tract *Areopagitica* (1644), in which he unequivocally stated that “the knowledge of good is . . . interwoven with the knowledge of evill” (17). He went on to call upon readers to read “books promiscuously” and “scout into regions of sin and falsity . . . by reading all manner of tractates” (19). Beard’s book of sensationalist tales can be viewed as an important forerunner of this approach. It started with the following claim:

If to auoid and eschew vice . . . be a chiefe vertue, and as it were the first degree of wisedome; then it is a necessarie point to know what vice and vertue is, and to discern the euill and good which either of them bring forth, to the end to beware lest wee dash our selves vnawares against vice in stead of vertue, and be caught with the deceitfull baits thereof. (a4)

David Mimics aptly describes the style of *The Theatre of Gods Iudgements* and similar works as “theatrical moralism,” which “exploits emotionally powerful visions for moralizing ends” (152). What is noteworthy, however, is that those “moralizing ends” were occasionally eclipsed by the “powerful visions,” which might suggest that such works’ didactic nature was sometimes possible to ignore. It is remarkable that quite many contemporary crime collections in that period treated the subject of crime with a sense of ambiguity. Many crime writers followed the conventions of didactic

sensationalism, but their didactic character was not always convincing. Some authors, for example, gently defied didactic conventions by failing to follow the custom of emphasizing their dismay about the crimes that inspired their works. Others writers actually assumed an even more rebellious stance by completely purging their works of any trace of didacticism, investing them with humorous overtones, and even turning criminals into admirable characters. Without strong moralistic overtones, their stories could be read as criminal adventures rather moralistic tales.

John Reynolds's collection of crime stories, which appeared shortly after Beard's, was an even more popular. Its full title promised readers tales about all sorts of curiosities: *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge against the Crying and Execrable Sinne of . . . Murther. VVith his Miraculous Discoveries, and Severe Punishments Thereof. In Thirtie Severall Tragical Histories (Digested into Sixe Bookes) Committed in Divers Countries beyond the Seas, never Published, or Imprinted in any other Language. Histories which Containe Great Varietie of Mournfull and Memorable Accidents, Historicall, Morall, & Divine, very Necessary to Refraine and Deterre from this Bloodie Sinne, which in These our Dayes Makes so Ample, and Large Progression* (1621). The book consists entirely of "Tragical Histories from forraigne parts," which betrays Reynolds's familiarity with *histoires tragiques* from the continent (Preface, n.p.). The tales he collected were rather exotic, but, as Reynolds claimed, his aim was educational; his book was meant to have a "good effect" on readers. We should not doubt this claim. Reynolds wrote and translated books on moral philosophy, which suggests that he considered himself a serious writer and educator. Each story in *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge* opens with a moralistic introduction and ends with a moralistic conclusion. Reynolds does not miss a chance to mention God's hatred of sinners often enough to break the narrative flow. But the immense popularity of the book (it went through a number of editions and adaptations in the seventeenth century) lied in that it went



Figure 5.5: The title page of *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge* (1657).

beyond the confines of didacticism and appealed to readers with stories of “miraculous discoveries” and reports from “divers countries beyond the seas.” The 1679 edition was

further expanded with ten racy tales about adulterers, allegedly collected from such far-flung places as Turkey, Greece, and Spain. The stories' foreignness, exoticism, and sensationalist excess are striking. What one remembers about them is not Reynolds' moralizing but alluringly shocking details: devilishly conniving adulterers, tortures, scenes of castration, mutilation, and freak accidents (Fig. 5.5).

The same strategy of balancing didacticism and voyeurism is apparent in *Wonderful Prodigies of Judgment and Mercy: Discovered in above Three Hundred Memorable Histories . . . Impartially Collected from Antient and Modern Authors of Undoubted Authority and Credit, and Imbellished with Divers Curious Pictures of Several Remarkable Passages* (1682), a collection of short accounts about blasphemers and their punishments, and *The Lives of Sundry Notorious Villains* (1678), another bestseller of this sort. The author of the latter, for his part, dutifully mentioned that his book had some didactic value but, for the most part, emphasized its titillating character and appealed to readers' love of dramatic adventures. To entice readers' fascination with the extraordinary, *The Lives of Sundry Notorious Villains* depicted its main characters as utterly monstrous criminals and brazen daredevils who could be both feared and admired.

You have here in these persons the Character of a Grand Debauchee, or daring Villain, abolishing and enervating, as much as in them lay, all Laws and Rules, without which it is impossible to suppose a Society: who having obliterated the natural impressions of Justice and Piety, have devised and accomplished all manner of Baseness and Villany, having performed such horrid actions as would have amazed themselves as well as others, had they not by a long Series of wickedness been hardned in their detestable undertakings. (a3-4)

The ethical contradictions of this passage, which reflect the ethical contradictions

of crime literature at large, are quite apparent. The book, which was published in a pocket-sized edition for easy reading, emphasized the “horrid” and “detestable” character of its subject—but it did it not to push readers away but rather to make them amazed about the extraordinary character of criminals’ lives.

BOOKS ABOUT FAMOUS PIRATES, THE NEWGATE CALENDAR,  
AND OTHER CRIME COLLECTIONS

Books about infamous pirates, which started to appear in the seventeenth century, were even more elaborate in their efforts to strike a balance between the exotic and realistic. Such collections, even if ostensibly didactic, were marketed primarily as colorful adventure tales. One particular notable example of this genre is Alexandre Exquemelin’s *De Americaensche Zee-Roovers* (1678), written by a Frenchman who was once a pirate himself. The book, published at first in Dutch in a lavish and well-illustrated edition, was translated into several other language and was known in English as *The History of the Bucaniers: Being an Impartial Relation of all the Battels, Sieges, and Other Most Eminent Assaults Committed for Several Years upon the Coasts of the VWest-Indies by the Pirates of Jamaica and Tortuga* (1684).

Exquemelin treated the subject of piracy with some literary care; his stories followed a discernable narrative structure, which usually lacked in many other reports on piracy at the time, and invested them with elaborate descriptions. What is more, the author appeared to be unusually sympathetic to pirates, turning them into admirable characters and even celebrities. The English edition of the book was actually dedicated to Henry Morgan, an English pirate-turned-governor, under whom Exquemelin served in the Caribbean. He noted that some pirates routinely “distinguished themselves . . . with that incredible Bravery and Gallantry, that their Great, Bold, and Generous Exploits in

point of Military Conduct and Valour, are in no wise to be match'd by any Circumstances of the Expeditions of the most famous Conquerours of the Universe" (a6). Politically sensitive readers with penchant for republicanism, which grew in influence at that time, could also appreciate the author's subtly anti-monarchical stance. Exquemelin praised American pirates' love of freedom and noted with pride that they were "not being maintain'd or upheld in their Actions by any Sovereign Prince" (1). In these respects, *The History of the Bucaniers* defied not only literary but also political conventions of the day.

Some other books on piracy took this strategy even further. *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the most Notorious Pyrates* (1724), which appeared under the pseudonym Charles Johnson but is sometimes attributed to Daniel Defoe, was also an ethically ambiguous but attractive literary creation. Its author claimed that his goal was to make "the Book useful" but could not resist the temptation to relate the stories he collected "with some Agreeableness and Life" (a5). The author's lack of moral concerns was quite obvious, which was even more noticeable in one of the subsequent versions of the book, *History and Lives of all the Most Notorious Pirates, and their Crews* (1732). Its editor made no apologies for the pirates' behavior—nor tried to condemn them, thus completely disentangling the subject of crime from moral concerns. The book was, essentially, a collection of adventure stories.

The same trend could also be perceived in the popular translation of J.M. von Archenholz's book on piracy, which appeared in Britain and the United States under the title of *History of the Pirates, Free-Booters, or Buccaneers of America* (1807). What was provocative about it was the ambiguity of the author's attitude toward piracy, which gave his book an admirable sense of complexity. He portrayed piracy as a controversial phenomenon with both admirable and deplorable characteristics. He offered many examples of pirates' brutality but put much emphasis on their courage, ferociousness and ingenuity, so that pirates appeared at once admirable and repulsive. To give his readers

some reasons to esteem such criminals, he described piracy as essentially a republican phenomenon, “a floating republic” in which people “acknowledged no other laws than some agreements which they had concluded among themselves” (2, 7). He praised them as independent men who “unanimously conceived a lofty idea of their independence” (30). At the same time, he did not hesitate to depict their acts of unforgivable brutality. Such a contradictory attitude, which inspired “opposite sensations,” was confusing but it was admirable in that Archenholz skillfully balanced different attitude towards piracy. His literary inclinations were also apparent in that he wrote not only for “every thinking reader” but also for “the lovers of the marvellous” (4, vi). Although he believed that a book about pirates can be used for some didactic purposes, he also understood that “a narrative of their adventures [can also be] more calculated to excite surprise and painful sensations than to furnish a source of instruction” (4).

The most famous crime collection published in England appeared under the general title *The Newgate Calendar*, which was given to compendiums of reports about criminals held at Newgate prison in London. Its astonishing popularity is an impressive testament to the readers’ undying obsession with sensationalism. The trend of publishing reports about prisoners held in well-known prisons, including Newgate, started in the late seventeenth century. The first publications of the Newgate series were fairly short, some not exceeding ten pages.<sup>69</sup> By the late eighteenth century there appeared several lengthy collections about the most infamous Newgate inmates, which

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<sup>69</sup> Some early manifestations of this genre include *News from Newgate: A Gaol-Delivery for the City of London and County of Middlesex. Or, An Exact and True Account of All Proceedings at the Late Sessions, Being a Perfect Particular of the Indictment, Arraignment, Tryal, Condemnation and Execution of Several Malefactors* (1673), *The True Narrative of the Proceedings at the Sessions for London and Middlesex, begun April the 30th, 1679. Giving an Exact Account of the Tryal of a Popish Priest, Condemn'd for High Treason; a Maid Tryed for Firing her Masters House, and Divers for Murder, Robbery on the Highway, Burglary and Other Notorious Crimes: with the Number of all that are Condemn'd to Die, were Burnt in the Hand, or to be Whipt, and Each Persons Particular Crime, and Circumstances of Discovery, Apprehension, &c.* (1679), and *The Tryal and Condemnation Of Several Notorious Malefactors . . .* (1681).

were remarkable in that they clearly exploited the subject of crime as entertainment. As a rule, they focused on the most bizarre and provocative cases, which is apparent in the title of one of its editions: *The New and Complete Newgate Calendar; or, Villany Displayed in all its Branches. Containing New and Authentic Accounts of All the Lives, Adventures, Exploits, Trials, Executions and Last Dying Speeches, Confessions . . . of the Most Notorious Malefactors and Others of Both Sexes and all Denominations, Who have Suffered Death and Other Exemplary Punishments for Murders, Burglaries, Felonies, Horse-Stealing, Bigamy, Forgeries, Highway Robberies, Footpad Robberies, Perjuries, Piracies, Rapes, Riots, Mobbing, Sodomy, Starving to Death, Sheep Stealing, Swindling, High-Treason, Petit-Treason, Sedition, and Other Misdemeanors. Interspersed with Notes, Reflections, and Remarks, Arising from the Several Subjects, Moral, Useful, and Entertaining* (1795). Considering the voyeuristic appeal of the Newgate literature, it was not surprising that English novelists used it as an inspiration for their fiction. The so-called Newgate novel, which flourished in England in the early nineteenth century, transformed infamous criminal cases into popular crime novels that glamorized criminals' adventures. The Newgate literature lived on in its many forms well beyond the prison's existence in 1902, mostly for the benefit of those who loved to read about unusual crimes. As the editor of the 1926 edition explained, criminal adventures were "pierced with windows for the imagination." He promised that his edition "will not be just a bare recital of grisly facts, but a book fraught with the romance and colour of human lives which, if not always of the most exalted, are certainly among the most vivid" (5: vii).

But in the early twentieth century, such a praise of crime literature could not surprise anyone. By then American and European readers were quite used to literature that routinely and skillfully turned crime into an object of voyeuristic delight. The United States in particular became a mecca of crime literature, which grew to dominate

American popular literature as early as the nineteenth century. The evolution of American crime literature, however, was not as straightforward as it was Europe. As we will see in the next chapter, didacticism was considered a far more important component in American culture than it was in Europe. For this reason, the development of American crime literature from its didactic origins was remarkably contentious.

## CHAPTER VI

### **METAMORPHOSES OF EARLY AMERICAN CRIME LITERATURE**

“We have no news from Europe. Who cares? We have enough interest on this dear delightful continent, to occupy all our feelings—all our soul—and all our sensibilities. In a short time, Europe will be like an old woman, without a tooth or a touch of sensibility. This continent is a fresh blooming young maiden—not yet knocked in the head with an axe, and disfigured in her lovely limbs.”

The New York *Herald*, April 15, 1836

**Précis:** The nineteenth century was the golden age of American crime literature, which included adventure tales, execution pamphlets, crime reportage, biographies of criminals, and popular crime novels. The immense popularity of these genres in the United States reflected not only their sensationalist appeal but also the privileged status of crime literature in American culture, in which the subject of crime is routinely exploited in media for ostensibly legitimate purposes. This trend emerged in early modern Europe and made a substantial impact on American literature. While acknowledging the affinities between American and European crime writers, we nonetheless have to recognize that the evolution of American crime literature reflected the social concerns unique for the American culture.

## ORIGINS OF EARLY AMERICAN CRIME LITERATURE

The nineteenth century in the United States saw an unprecedented outbreak of crime literature that dominated the literary market: police reports, execution accounts, trial records, racy journalism, gory crime novels, and many other sensationalist publications which, considering writers' inventiveness, are rather hard to classify. Indeed, Americans consumed crime literature with such an amazing alacrity, that contemporary writers could not be blamed for tirelessly exploiting the public's fascination with crime. A typical American novelist, as one journalist wistfully noted in 1842, was "admired, appreciated and rewarded" for writing about nothing but "murder, robbery and fornication."

He drags his heroes from the scaffold, lays the scenes of their exploits at Hell Gate, . . . places them on their knees in prayer at one time, and sets them in cutting throats a few moments after—brings his heroines from brothels, and ends by making them keep assignations in witches' huts—where they give up the ghost in the most approved melodramatic style.  
(*Rake* Nov 26, 1842)

This perceptive observation was accompanied by a cartoon that caricatured popular American novelists as literary hacks whose works were inspired not by muses but ghosts of dead people and crime reports (Fig. 6.1).

The popularity of crime literature in the United States should not be regarded as a spontaneous development or an outbreak of meaningless sensationalism. It grew out of the long tradition of popular crime literature that, as we saw in the previous chapter, emerged in the Western world almost simultaneously with the printing press. The early American writers who turned their attention to the subject of crime were undoubtedly influenced by their European counterparts. In fact, some superficial observations about seventeenth- and eighteenth-century crime literature on both sides of the Atlantic may

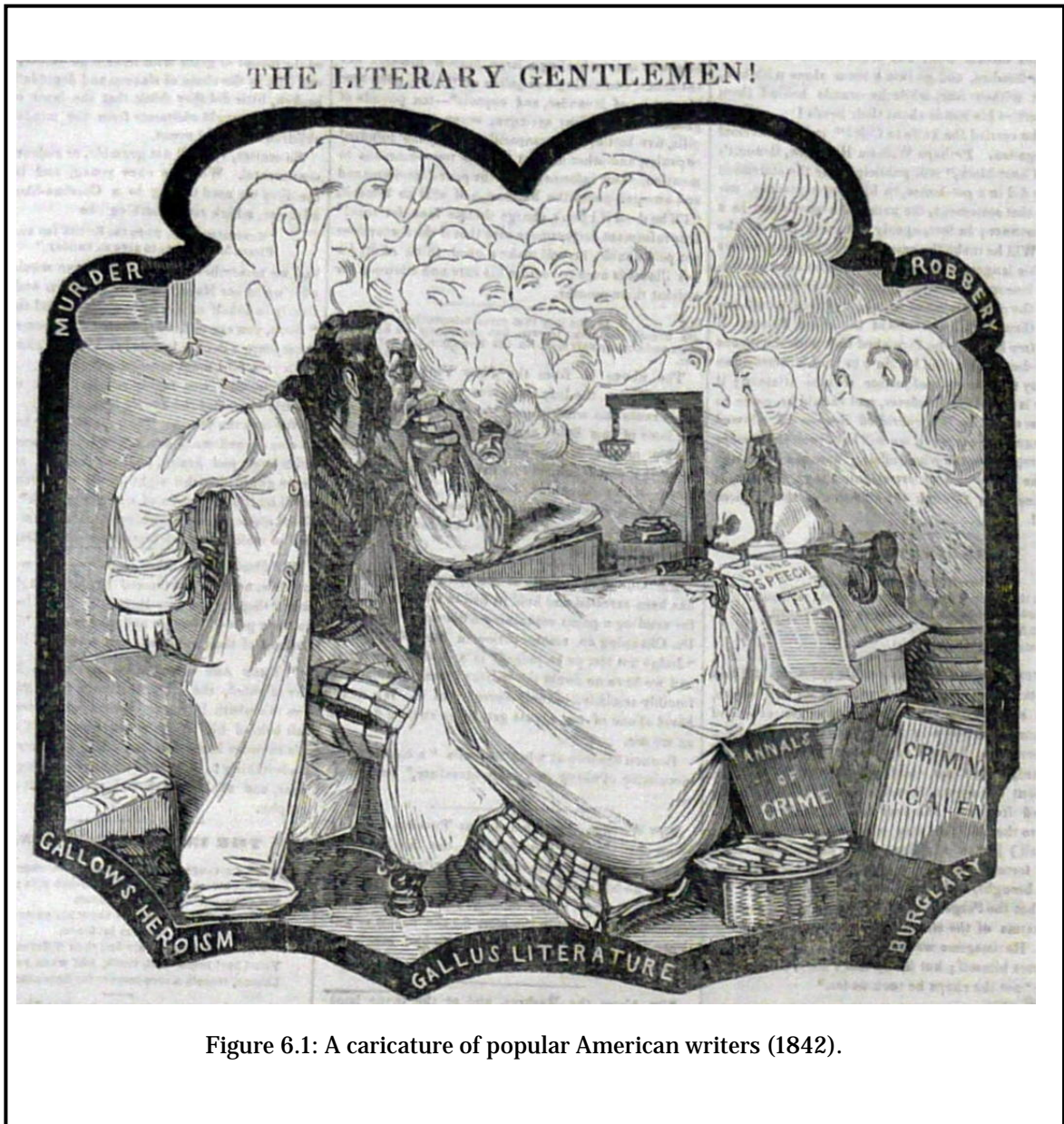


Figure 6.1: A caricature of popular American writers (1842).

suggest that differences between them are rather negligible. What is immediately noticeable, for example, is that the earliest forms of crime literature in Europe and the colonies were didactic. It was promoted by moralists and religious figures, which was particularly the case in the Puritan New England. What is more, the evolution of crime literature from didacticism to voyeurism followed the same path in Europe and the colonies, where writers often found themselves following the trends from across the Atlantic. But these similarities notwithstanding, we should also recognize the originality

and nuances of the colonial crime literature, which almost from its inception grew to reflect the realities of the New World rather than to adhere to European literary conventions.

What was particularly unique about the earliest forms of American crime literature in New England was the extent to which its practitioners embraced didactic principles. They were tireless (and awfully repetitive) in their efforts to show that crime *always* leads to punishment. This point forms the basic trajectory in colonial crime literature, which was predominantly represented by the works that end with criminals' execution. In typical publication that dominated the market, such as *Execution of the Pirates* (ca. 1820), the didactic message clearly relied on the Bible: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." The two illustrations that accompanied

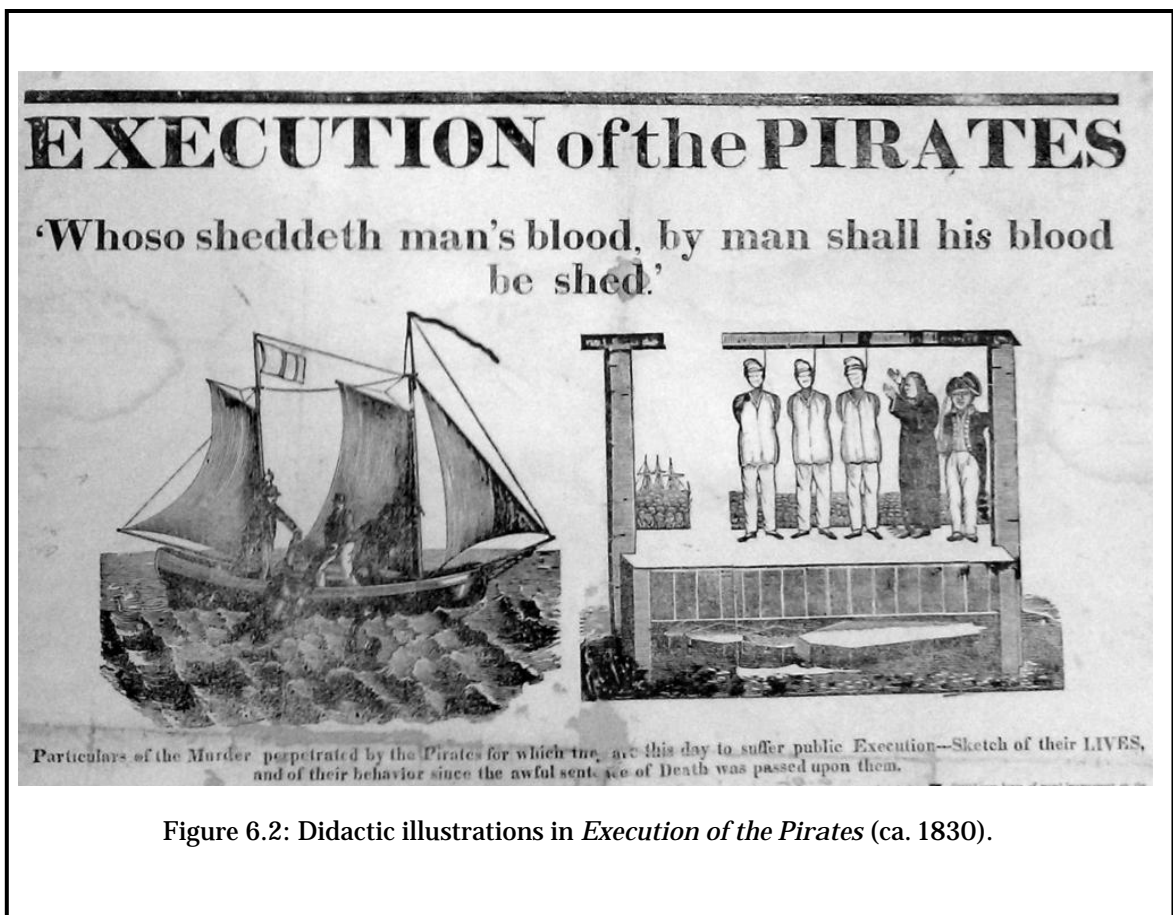


Figure 6.2: Didactic illustrations in *Execution of the Pirates* (ca. 1830).

this message were arranged without any room for ambiguity: one shows a crime while the other depicts criminals' execution (Fig. 6.2).

It is noteworthy that while the first European publications about crime were news reports, in New England crime literature originated with religious sermons delivered during punishment rituals. As we saw in Chapter III, the authorities, in the ranks of which we find the first American crime writers, used those rituals to promote specific religious and political ideas. They were designed to educate the masses about the importance of social order, the dangers of crime, and the value of religion. American crime literature was born in a flurry of cheap pamphlets about executions.

The genre was inaugurated in 1674 with the publication of Samuel Danforth's sermon *Cry of Sodom Enquired Into; Upon Occasion of the Arraignment and Condemnation of Benjamin Goad, for His Prodigious Villany*. Danforth, a well-known minister and a prolific writer, delivered it on the occasion of a young man's execution for bestiality. Benjamin Goad, as the culprit was named, was unfortunate enough to be accused to being sexually partial to all sorts of livestock. He was executed in an extravagant ritual, in which he was forced to listen to Danforth's lengthy sermon and then see the polluted creatures slaughtered and burned in from of his eyes.

The sermon, which was rushed into print shortly after it was delivered, reflected what would become the basic characteristics of early American crime literature. It grew out of an unusually scandalous crime that captivated the public; Goad's offense seemed at once something all-too-real (many people knew him and his parents) and awfully unreal. Danforth's strategy was also remarkable in that *Cry of Sodom* blatantly exploited the crime that inspired it for religious reasons. The minister used it merely as an occasion to talk about the state of affairs in the colony. Consistent with the Puritan concept of crime, he portrayed the culprit's transgression not as isolated episode, which it probably was, but as a manifestation of human wickedness and a sign of colonists'

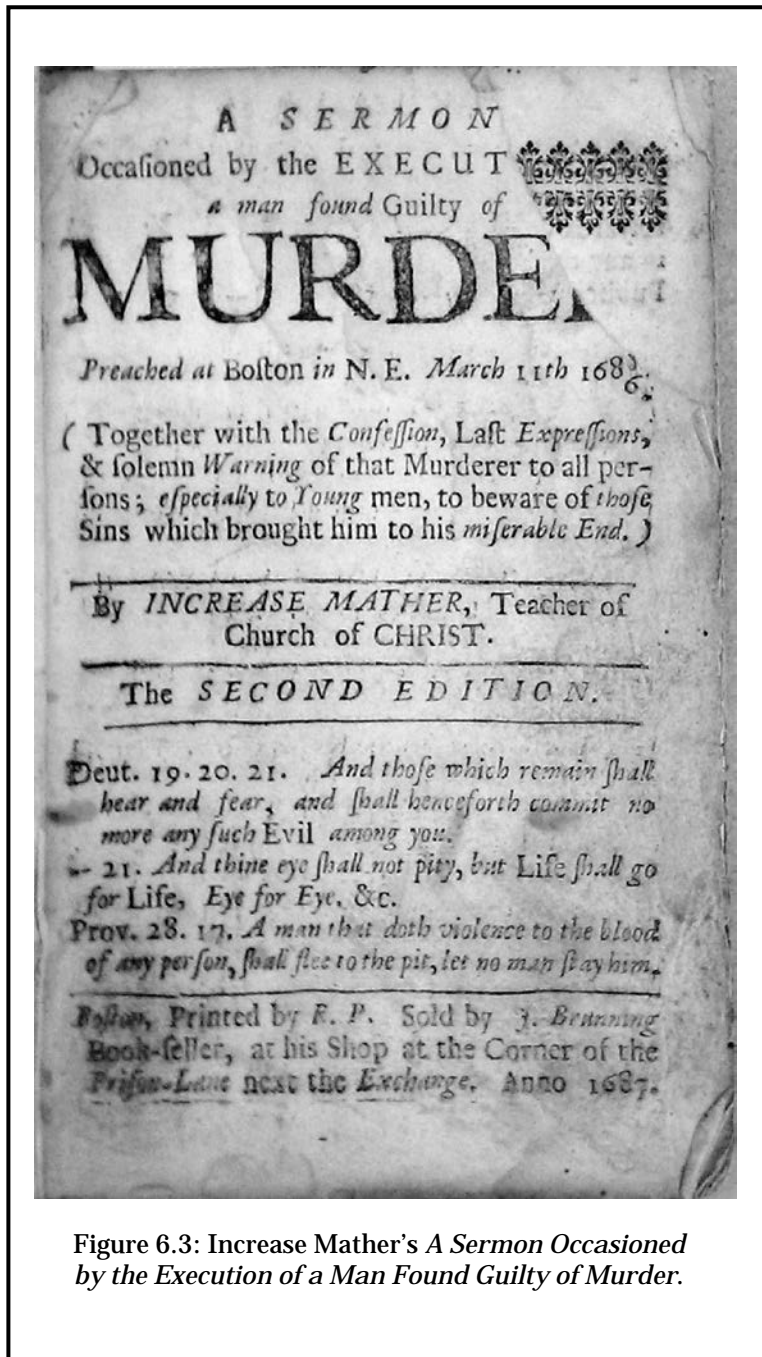


Figure 6.3: Increase Mather's *A Sermon Occasioned by the Execution of a Man Found Guilty of Murder*.

backsliding. Goad himself was mentioned only in a few parts. Skipping many details about the case, Danforth started his sermon with a tedious compilation of Biblical evidence against bestiality. Then he moved on to a strikingly general discussion of “Our cursed Nature,” which he at length condemned for its inclination toward “all manner of sins” (14). What is impossible to ignore in that sermon is that Danforth’s generalities completely eclipse the specifics of Goad’s transgression. For Danforth, Goad’s crime was merely a

symbol of such grand issues as human depravity, man’s spiritual concerns, and (the versatility of logic!) the threat it posed to the religious order of the colony. Even further departing from the crime that inspired that occasion, Danforth gave a long lecture on all the seven deadly sins, which he masterfully wove into a web of conspiracy that threatened the entire Puritan experiment. In other words, it was not Benjamin Goad who

was on trial but people's "cursed Nature" in general. That "cursed Nature," which was described as the cause of so many crimes, ultimately became an inexhaustible source of sensational material for ministers' sermonizing.

The notion of common sinfulness tremendously helped ministers publish their sermons. Since everyone was assumed to be a sinner, everyone was expected to relate to the condition of doomed criminals. This meant that everyone had to appreciate execution sermons because they were addressed to virtually all colonists. As Increase Mather remarked in *A Sermon Occasioned by the Execution of a Man Found Guilty of Murder* (1687), his words had little use for the culprits. The readers, however, could find his sermon useful. They were meant to "*be awakened by this sad Example*" and use it as an occasion to think about their spiritual condition (a2). After all, every colonist was guilty of something. Like Danforth before him, Mather was quite direct in his comparison of parishioners to condemned criminals: "O Lord," he asked dramatically, "how many are there in this great Assembly, who have lived, and *do* live in those very sins, for which this Man confesseth . . . Let sinners hear & take warning this day" (23). By striking "*terror & trembling*" in the hearts of his readers, Mather thought that he performed his ministerial duty. It also helped sell his pamphlet. Since everyone was a sinner, everyone had to be his reader.

Apocalyptic tales and fanciful accounts of the Judgment Day were important precursors of the Puritan execution sermon in that they also perpetuated the notion of common sinfulness and emphasized that everyone has criminal inclinations. Horrific descriptions of the Judgment Day, which can be regarded as a grand punishment ritual, were generally meant to emphasize the pervasiveness of man's depravity. Typical images of God's last judgment depict sinners as a faceless mass, thus suggesting that criminality is a common human trait. In this respect, Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom* (1662), which appeared a few years before the first execution pamphlet was published in

Massachusetts, can be read as an important forerunner of the Puritan execution sermon (Fig. 3.2).

Wigglesworth's poem is a dramatic account of the Judgment Day. It opens with a stunning scene, as God is waking people up in the middle of a night for judgment. The "vile wretches," as Wigglesworth described his fellow colonists, are clearly caught unprepared and grew despondent. If only they knew. If only they were better prepared. But it is too late. Much of the poem describes sinners' reaction as they realize their dreadful fate:

They cry, no, no: Alas! and wo!  
our Courage all is gone. . .  
.....  
No heart so bold, but now grows cold  
and almost dead with fear;  
No eye so dry, but now can cry  
and pour out many a tear.  
.....  
Mean men lament, great men do rent  
their Robes. And tear their hair:  
They do not spare their flesh to tear  
through horrible despair. (3)

*The Day of Doom* relied on several elements that would become common in the Puritan execution sermon. What is immediately noticeable is that Wigglesworth chose an exceptionally provocative subject for his poem. Like ministers who thought that executions were suitable occasions for moralizing, he believed that writing about sinners' fate on the Judgment Day could shock his readers enough to make them think about their spiritual condition. As Wigglesworth explained in the postscript to *The Day of*

*Doom*, the poem was meant to be a crude awakening for everyone. It was designed to dispel readers' sense of security. Furthermore, the poem clearly expected its readers to compare their condition to that of doomed sinners. After all, the characters in characters in *The Day of Doom* were average people to whom anyone could relate. Finally, the poem's overall message was identical to the point we find in many execution sermons—if one delayed acknowledging his or her sins, one could get caught unprepared for God's judgment. In a truly alarmist fashion, Wigglesworth warned his readers that they could die at any moment and end up in the same situation as doomed sinners.

This idea was to become one of the central themes in execution pamphlets, many of which included not only sermons but also criminals' confessions and ministers' interviews with the condemned. In its basic form, each confession, at least as it appeared in print, followed a certain formula. Under a minister's guidance, narrator criminal relayed the story of his life, recalled his transgressions, and finally expressed his remorse. What made confessions particularly effective was the criminals' lament that they did not have enough time to prepare for their execution. That lament was what any reader could relate to, because no one really knew when one was to die. Anyone, if he died suddenly, could find himself lamenting not having enough time to prepare for God's judgment. It was enough to make such confessions popular in deeply religious New England.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The practice of including criminals' confessions in didactic publications emerged in Europe. My observation is based on the English pamphlet *An Alarme for Sinners: Containing the Confession, Prayers, Letters, and Last Words of Robert Foulkes* (London, 1679), which focuses on the life of a minister who executed for adultery and killing his bastard child. American confessional narratives date slightly later and include Increase Mather's *A Sermon Occasioned by the Execution of a Man Found Guilty of Murder . . . Together with the Confession, Last Expressions, & Solemn Warning of that Murderer to All Persons; Especially to Young Men, to Beware of Those Sins which Brought him to his Miserable End* (1687), Cotton Mather's *Instructions to the LIVING, from the Conditions of the DEAD: A Brief Relation of REMARKABLES in the Shipwreck of above One Hundred Pirates* (1717), *The Converted Sinner: The Nature of a Conversion to Real and Vital Piety: and the Manner in Which it is to be Pray'd & Striv'n for: A Sermon Preached in Boston, May 31, 1724, in the Hearing and at the Desire of Certain Pirates, a Little Before Their Execution: to Which*

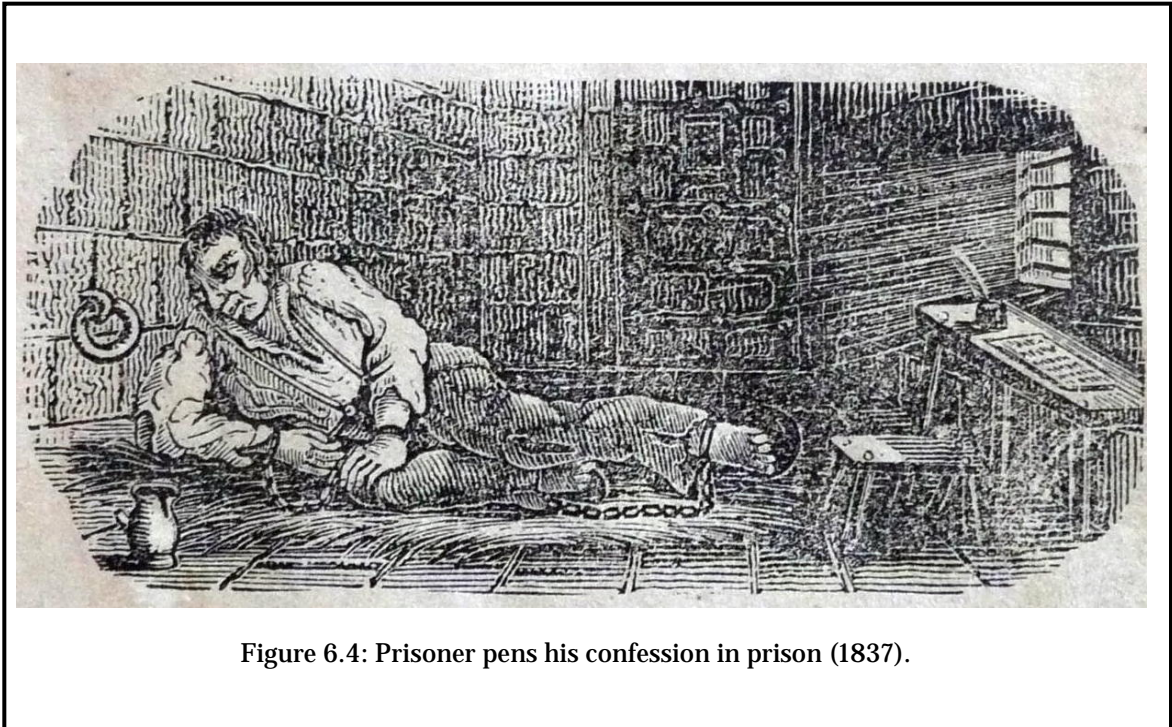


Figure 6.4: Prisoner pens his confession in prison (1837).

What made them even more popular was readers' appreciation of the confessions' alluring complexity. There were plenty of questions one could ask. Was a confession authentic or fabricated by the publishers? Was the culprit's remorse genuine or contrived? It was not easy to tell. Confessional narratives were shaped by a variety of factors. On the one hand, the convicts who penned their confessions tried to assert some control over the ways of writing about *their* experiences, which were, in each case, unique. On the other hand, their confessions were shaped by certain rhetorical conventions, readers' expectations, as well as editors' interests. These and other factors created the sense of ambiguity which many readers, particularly those with little interest

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*There is Added, a more Private Conference of a Minister With Them* (1724), *The Vial Poured out upon the Sea: A Remarkable Relation of Certain Pirates* (1726), and Benjamin Coleman's *It is a Fearful Thing to Fall into the Hands of the Living God: Sermon Preached to Some Miserable Pirates* (1726). Criminal confessions of didactic sort remained popular into the nineteenth century, which is apparent in *Confessions and Execution of the Pirates, Gibbs & Wansley* (1831).

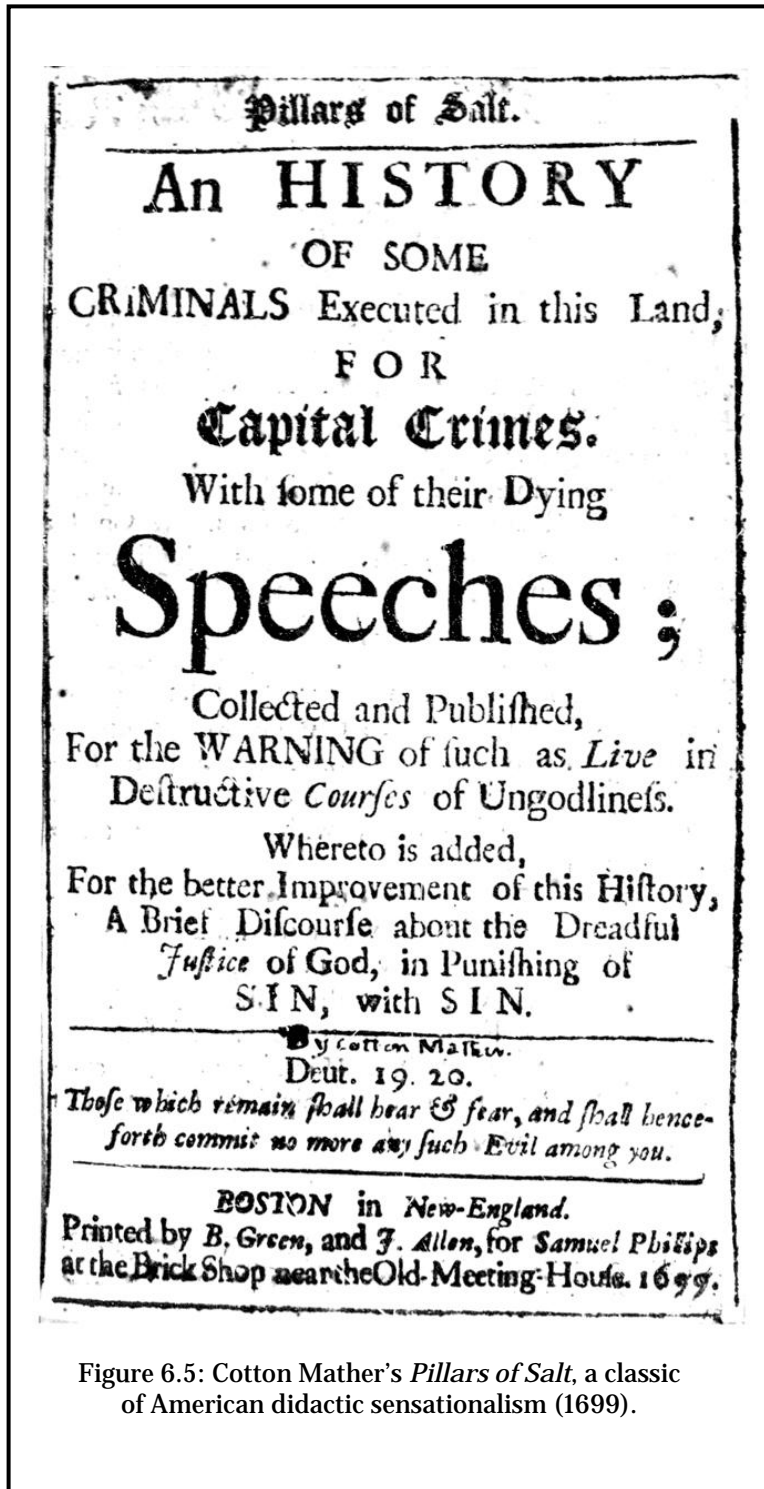


Figure 6.5: Cotton Mather's *Pillars of Salt*, a classic of American didactic sensationalism (1699).

in didactic sermonizing, could appreciate.<sup>71</sup>

It was not long before Americans could lay their hands on the first American collection of crime stories, Cotton Mather's *Pillars of Salt. An History of some Criminals Executed in this Land, for Capital Crimes. With some of their Dying Speeches; Collected and Published, for the Warning of such as Live in Destructive Courses of Ungodliness. Whereto is Added, for the better Improvement of this History, a Brief Discourse about the Dreadful Justice of God, in Punishing of Sin, with Sin* (1699). An ardent proponent of religious

didacticism, Mather wrote the book in the hope that it could be used to “correct and

<sup>71</sup> Ann Fabian offers an elaborate analysis of early American criminal confessions in the “Convicts” chapter of *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

reform” the public’s morals as well as “to Suppress *growing Vice*” (59). It was clearly designed for a wide audience. Although it was substantially longer than typical execution pamphlets, it appeared as a cheap, pocket-sized paperback. All good Christians could afford it.

Its popularity notwithstanding, *Pillars of Salt* remained the only American crime collection for almost a century. The next one, *The American Bloody Register: Containing a True and Complete History of the Lives, Last Words, and Dying Confessions of Three of the Most Noted Criminals that have ever Made Their Exit from a Stage in America, viz. Richard Barrick and John Sullivan, High Way Robbers* (1784), was published almost at the end of the next century and was soon followed with a number of other collection. They were all quite spectacular in their own ways, but Mather’s influence was undeniable: they dwelled on exceptionally sensational crimes under the guise of moralizing.<sup>72</sup>

A strong didactic component was also apparent in so-called captivity narratives, another important category of crime literature which early American writers claimed as their own. The genre originated in Europe, but, considering the colonies’ proximity to the wilderness, grew to be appreciated by American readers as a distinctly American genre.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Among other works, my observations rely on *The United States Criminal Calendar: Or an Awful Warning to the Youth of America; Being an Account of the Most Horrid Murders, Piracies, Highway Robberies, &c. &c.* (1832), *Confessions, Trials, and Biographical Sketches of the Most Cold Blooded Murderers, Who Have Been Executed in This Country from its First Settlement down to the Present Time—Compiled Entirely from the Most Authentic Sources; Containing also, Accounts of Various other Daring Outrages Committed in this and other Countries* (1837), and Charles MacFarlane’s *The Lives and Exploits of Banditti and Robbers in all Parts of the World* (1833).

<sup>73</sup> The earliest captivity narrative is the one written by the German mercenary Hans Staden after his captivity in Brazil. It came out in 1557 under the title *Warhaftige Historia und beschreibung eyner Landtschafft der Wilden Nacketen, Grimmigen Menschfresser-Leuthen in der Newenwelt America gelegen*. An international bestseller, it was translated into a number of European languages, including English. For a succinct survey of other English sources, see Daniel J. Vitkus’ “The Circulation of bodies: Slavery, Maritime Commerce and English Captivity Narratives in the Early Modern Period” (in *Colonial and Post-Colonial Incarceration*. Ed. Graeme Harper. New York: Continuum, 2001: 23-37).



Figure 6.6: An illustration from John Smith's book (1624).

Captivity narratives were published as accounts of Europeans and colonists who survived captivity among indigenous people. The earliest and probably most well-known captivity story to come out of the English colonies was that of John Smith and Pocahontas. It was based on the episode that took place in December of 1607. One of the

leaders of the Virginia colony, Smith had the misfortune of being abducted by Indians when he was on a scouting mission. As he claimed upon his rescue, he was nearly executed but was miraculously saved by the king's daughter Pocahontas. The young woman consequently followed Smith to the colony, where she was baptized and ultimately married another colonist who took her to England. Since then their story became a myth, inspiring quite a number of semi-documentary and fictional tributes. But in the early seventeenth century, it was primarily known from Smith's *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (1624), which read like a dramatic account of the author's ordeal among heathens. Smith transformed his personal story into a parable of the colony's struggle for survival.<sup>74</sup>

Other American captivity narratives were far more shocking in their emphasis on the brutality of the world in which colonists lived. The one written by Mary Rowlandson, who was captured by the Wampanoag tribe during King Philip's War in 1676, is the case in point. *A True History of the Captivity & Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, a Minister's Wife in New-England. Wherein is Set Forth, the Cruel and Inhumane Usage She Underwent amongst the Heathens, for Eleven Weeks Time: And her Deliverance from Them* (1682), as she titled her book, offered many examples of the nastiness and sadistic inclinations of the "the bloody heathen." The narrative opens with a stunning description of a massacre perpetrated by the Indians. They killed most villagers methodically and, as Rowlandson was careful to note, at times simply for pleasure. One man, for example, begged for his life, but Indians just "knock'd him in head, and stripped him naked, and split open his Bowels" (1). Other details were even more shocking:

[M]y Brother in Law . . . fell down dead, whereat the *Indians* scornfully shouted, and hallowed, and were presently upon him, stripping off his

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<sup>74</sup> See Book III of Smith's *The Generall Historie*, particularly pp. 44-9.

Clothes. The bullets flying thick, one went through my side, and the same (as would seem) throw the Bowels and Hand of my dear Child in my Arms. One of my elder Sisters Children (named *William*) had then his Leg broken, which the *Indians* perceiving, they knock'd him on the head. Thus were we butchered by those merciless Heathen, standing amazed, with the Blood running down to our Heels. (2)

Rowlandson spent over a year in Indian captivity, which made her even more convinced of her captors' savagery. Even the so-called Praying Indians, the Indians who converted to Christianity and were presumably sympathetic to colonists, were in her view hopelessly savage. Other writers, who had similar experiences, agreed, typically depicting Indians as inhumane monsters (Fig. 6.7).

For the average reader in Europe, such accounts could be read merely as enthralling crime stories. For many colonists, however, captivity narratives were constant reminders that the colonists were engaged in a protracted struggle with the heathenism of the New World. But more importantly, those narratives reflected uniquely American concerns and religious beliefs. As a rule, they promoted the notion that Indian invasions were God's way of either testing colonists' resolve or punishing their transgressions. This idea went along with the notion of common sinfulness. Every colonist was guilty of either some sin or, at the very least, of lacking religious zeal. Hence, God was displeased with colonists and allowed Indians to attack them. In symbolic terms, a captive was like the colony at large. It could be overrun by Indians and vanish at any time. The captives' survival was meant to be regarded as a sign of God's mercy, but, their stories emphasized, that mercy was not to be taken for granted.

Many captivity narratives were meant to be read as calls for religious revival. John Williams, who survived captivity in 1703-4 amidst Indians and, later, the French Catholics, made this point right in the beginning of his narrative *The Redeemed Captive*



Figure 6.7: *Narrative of the Massacre, by the Savages, of the Wife and Children of Thomas Baldwin (1835).*

*Returning to Zion* (1707): “The history I am going to write proves, that days of fasting and prayer, without reformation, will not avail to turn away the anger of God from a professing people” (9). His trials, like those of the entire colony, were God’s way of warning colonists. This point is also evident in the alternative title of Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, some editions of which were published under the title *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*. What it reminds us is that colonists preferred to see such accounts framed in religious concerns particular to their culture. It was what made many early American captivity narratives a uniquely American genre of crime literature.

The same can be said about the crime ballad, the genre which became popular in the colonies in the eighteenth century. Its origins were European; as we saw earlier, the crime ballad flourished in Germany as early as the sixteenth century and was fairly popular in other European countries well before the colonization of New England.

Indeed, at first crime ballads were regarded as foreign; some Puritan ministers despised what they called “foolish Songs and Ballads,” because they corrupted “the minds and Manners of many People” (Daniel Cohen, *Pillars of Salt* 15). Poetry about crime simply did not make much sense—at least in the context of the Puritan culture. Ministers sensed that the style of such ballads was incompatible with the didactic spirit of Puritan crime literature. Ballads’ lyricism, however crude, was clearly at odds with the somber spirit of the occasions that inspired them. It explains the reason why the crime ballad was slow to take root in New England.

To overcome the apparent foreignness of this genre, the first American crime ballads were published as cheap broadsides and carried the titles that reflected the spirit of Puritan moralizing: *Advice from the Dead to the Living: or, A Solemn Warning to the World. Occasioned by the Untimely Death of Poor Julian, Who was Executed on Boston Neck . . . for the Murder of Mr. John Rogers of Pembroke . . . Very Proper to be Read by all Persons, but Especially Young People, and Servants of all Sorts* (1732) and *A Mournful Poem on the Death of John Ormsby and Matthew Cushing, Who were Appointed to be Executed on Boston Neck* (1734). What is more, such poems always ended with a clear didactic message: “let this Warning loud and shrill / be heard by e’vry one, / O do no more such Wickedness” (*A Mournful Poem*). Finally, the authors of early American crime ballads underscored their didactic character by trying to dispel the notion that their works had any entertaining value. In fact, they often suppressed any detail that could betray their ballads’ aesthetic value. They even attacked the very concept of art.



*The Dying CRIMINAL:*

A

P O E M.

By ROBERT YOUNG, on his own Execution; which was on Thursday last, November 11th, 1779, for a RAPE committed on the Body of Jane Green, a Child eleven Years of Age, at Brookfield, in the County of Worcester, on the 3d Day of September last. Collected from his own Manuscript.

ATTEND, ye youth ! if ye would fain be old,  
Take solemn warning when my tale is told ;  
In blooming life my soul I must resign,  
In my full strength, just aged twenty-nine.

But a short time ago, I little thought  
That to this shameful end I should be brought ;  
But the foul fiend, excepting God controuls,  
Dresses sin lovely when he baits for souls.

Could you the monster in true colours see,  
His subject nor his servant would you be ;  
His gilded baits would ne'er allure your minds,  
For he who serves him bitter anguish finds.

Had I as oft unto my Bible went,  
As on vain pleasures I was eager bent,  
These lines had never been composed by me,  
Nor my vile body hung upon the tree.

Those guilty pleasures that I did pursue,  
No more delight---they're painful to my view ;  
That monster, Sin, that dwells within my breast,  
Tortures my soul and robs me of my rest

The fatal time I very well remember,  
For it was on the third day of September,  
I went to *Western*, thoughtless of my God,  
Though worlds do tremble at his awful nod :

With pot-companions did I pass the day,  
And then direct to *Brookfield* bent my way,  
The grand-deceiver thought it was his time,  
And led me to commit a horrid crime.

When it was dark I met the little fair,  
(Great God forgive, and hear my humble pray'r)  
And, O ! dear *Jane*, wilt thou forgive me too,  
For I most cruelly have used you.

I took advantage of the dark'ning hour,  
(For beasts always by night their prey devour)

This little child, eleven years of age,  
Then fell a victim to my brutal rage ;

Nor could the groans of innocence prevail ;  
O pity, reader, though I tell the tale ;  
Drunk with my lust, on cursed purpose bent,  
Severely and th'unhappy innocent

Her sister dear was to have been my wife,  
But I've abus'd her and must lose my life ;  
Was I but innocent, my heart would bleed  
To hear a wretch, like me, had done the deed.

Reader, whoe'er thou art, a warning take,  
Be good and just, and all your sins forsake ;  
May the Almighty God direct your way  
To the bright regions of eternal day.

A dying man to you makes this request,  
For sure he wishes that you may be blest ;  
And shortly, reader, thou must follow me,  
And drop into a vast eternity !

The paths of lewdness, and these base profane,  
Produce keen anguish, sorrow, fear and shame ;  
Forsake them then, I've trod the dreary road,  
My crimes are great, I groan beneath the load.

For a long time on sin should you be bent,  
You'll find it hard, like me for to repent ;  
The more a dangerous wound doth mortify,  
The more the surgeon his best skill must try.

These lines I write within a gloomy cell,  
I soon shall leave them with a long farewell ;  
Again I caution-all who read the same,  
And beg they would their wicked lives reclaim.

O THOU, Almighty God, who gave me breath,  
Save me from suffering a second death,  
Through faith in thy dear Son may I be free,  
And my poor soul ascend to dwell with Thee.

Sold at the Printing-Office, New-London;

49349

Figure 6.8: *The Dying Criminal* (1779).

The broadside with a ballad titled *The Dying Criminal* (1779) is the case in point. It was presumably composed by one Robert Young as he awaited his execution for raping his wife's twelve-year-old sister. Judging from the content, the ballad's author, who was most likely not the condemned man but someone who was eager to exploit the case, adhered to the didactic spirit of the earlier publications.<sup>75</sup> He dutifully claimed that his sole purpose for writing his poetic confession was to express contrition and prevent others from following his mistakes. To demonstrate his faithfulness to the principles of didacticism, he even went on to condemn the concepts which at that time were commonly associated with art: deception, pleasure, and beauty. He emphasized that his crime was in part precipitated by his artistic sensibilities, which he was now eager to condemn. To make his point, he described Satan as the "grand-deceiver," a great artist who "dresses sin lovely when he baits the souls." He explained that his mistake, which led him "to commit [that] horrid crime," consisted of not being able to see through Satan's artifice, being blind to "the monster in true colours," and falling for "vain" and "guilty" pleasures.<sup>76</sup>

Does it mean that all American crime ballads were strictly didactic? Not quite. Plenty of other examples suggest that their authors escaped the confines of didacticism. What made particular crime ballads more popular than others were not only their shocking content but also their sense of uniqueness and even aesthetic appeals that relied on readers' voyeuristic appreciation of crime literature. The readers of *A Dialogue between Elizabeth Smith, and John Sennet* (1773) could appreciate the broadside

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<sup>75</sup> What publishers presented as Robert Young's confession appeared in several forms, in verse and prose. Apart from *The Dying Criminal*, there also circulated the broadside titled *The Last Words, and Dying Speech of Robert Young*, which featured yet another version of the culprit's confession. The styles of the two are completely different.

<sup>76</sup> Other examples of confessional crime ballads include *Verses, Written on the Trial, Confession, Execution, and Dying Words of Moses Lion* (Johnstown, NY, 1829) and *Abr'm Prescott's Confession, of the Murder of Mrs. Sally Cochran* (Concord, NH, 1835), which reminds us that didactic elements in crime ballads remained apparent well into the nineteenth century.

because it was written as a theatrical exchange which supposedly took place between two criminals as they stood by the gallows with ropes around their necks. *A Dialogue between a Reverend Clergyman and Daniel Wilson* (1774) was written as a dramatic interview. *The Execution of Wild Robert; Being a Warning to All Parents* (1800) was a criminal's poetic address to his mother, whom he blamed for not bringing him as a moral and religious man.

The increasingly elaborate appearance of broadsides with crime ballads was a particularly telling sign of the genre's voyeuristic appeal. To cite the example of *Hicks the Pirate*, the broadside inspired by the 1860 execution of the pirate Albert Hicks, elaborate and colorful engravings eventually became common in such publications.

With the proliferation of such poetic crime literature in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was understandable that many ministers and moralists were concerned about this genre's lack of ideological consistency that, they feared, loosened the seriousness of their endeavors. They were alarmed that discussions of crime, which were traditionally monopolized by Puritan ministers for didactic purposes, were increasingly often used in morally dubious publications of openly sensationalist character: biographies of criminals, dramatic accounts of scandalous crimes, and lavishly illustrated broadsides. What was even more disturbing was the implicit disingenuousness of some works, which relied on recognizable elements of Puritan rhetoric simply to cover up their authors' and readers' interest in lurid crime. The serious tone of such publications often appeared to be nothing more than a disingenuous act, a rhetorical necessity that sounded like a subtle parody of Puritan didacticism.

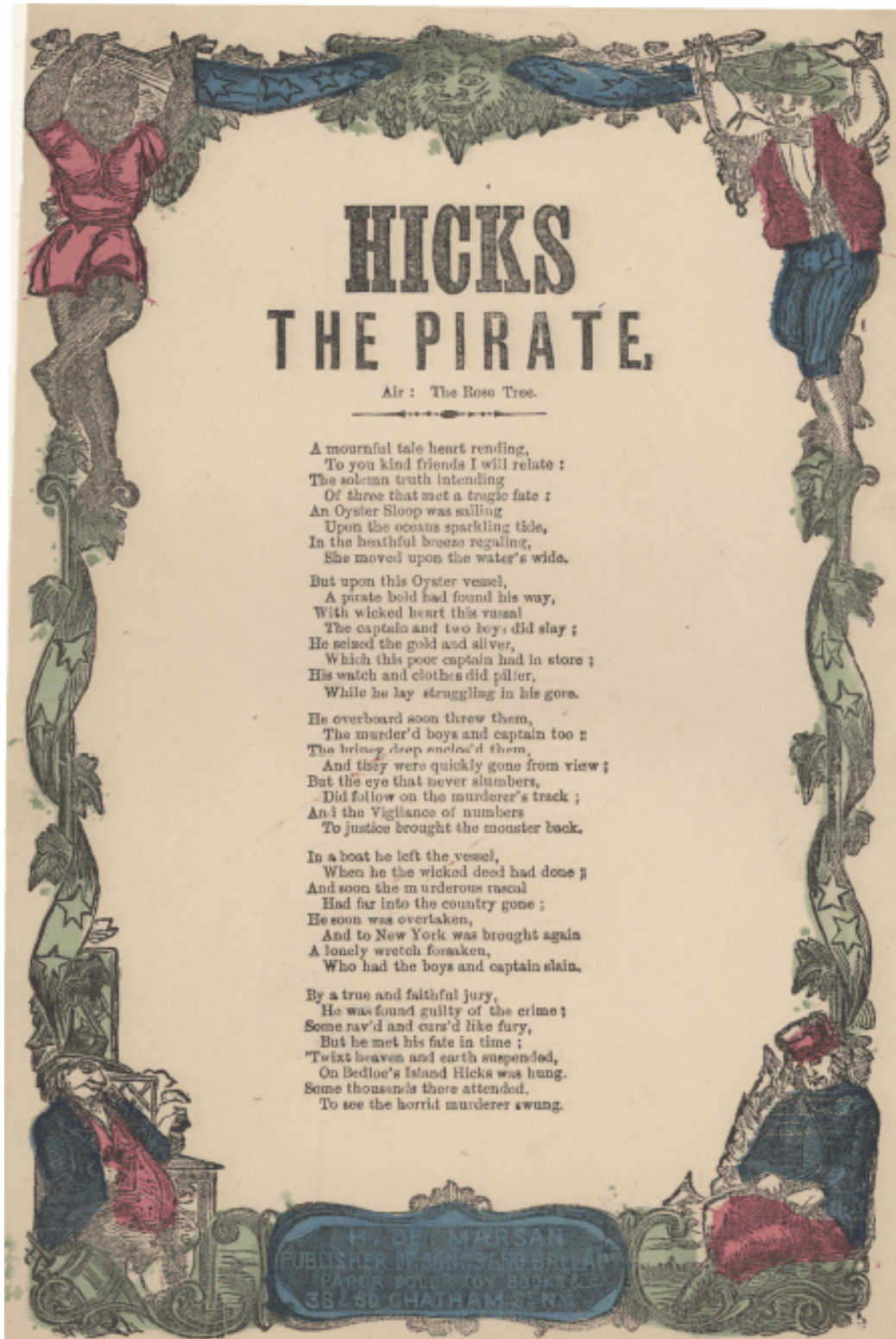


Figure 6.9: *Hicks the Pirate* (1860).

## GOthic IMAGINATION: AMERICAN CRIME LITERATURE AFTER THE REVOLUTION

In the aftermath of the Revolution, American crime literature was in the process of radical transformation. By the middle of the nineteenth century, which can be described as the golden age of American sensationalism, it grew into a set of vibrant and immensely genres.

On the surface, this transformation can be characterized in the same terms as the evolution of European crime literature. First, publications about crime grew less didactic. Second, the growing diversity of new forms of crime literature made it appealing to a wide audience. Finally, some crime writers went so far as to depict criminals in positive light. What was different about the evolution of American crime literature, however, was that it did not simply follow the line from didacticism to voyeurism. American crime writers could not abandon the neo-Puritan tradition of didacticism. That tradition, after all, was a strong component of American culture, and as such it continues to influence writers to this day. What they often did was to merge the didactic and voyeuristic trends in crime literature. This was obviously easier said than done. Voyeuristic literature about crime, particularly the gothic novel and the criminal adventure, was unpalatable to strict adherents of didactic sensationalism. This is why American crime literature can be characterized as a conflict between didacticism and voyeurism—or a conflict between different ways of writing about crime.

The transformation of American crime literature was particularly notable in the rise of American Gothic literature in the early nineteenth century. The genre was imported. It emerged a few decades earlier in England on the wave of readers' growing fascination with horror and weirdness. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story* (1764), the first gothic novel, exhibits all the characteristics of the new genre. The novel is set in Italy in the distant past, the time of the Crusades, which enhances the

subject's sense of exoticism. The plot is propelled by an amazingly mysterious and extraordinary murder; the king's son is crushed to death by a gigantic helmet that falls from above. Before the ensuing investigation reveals the causes of the young man's death, readers get to witness even more violence, murders, and horrific revelations.

More often than not, the popularity of Gothic novels is regarded as a reaction to the optimistic spirit of the Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century intellectual movement that put much emphasis on the power of human reason and notion of scientific certainty. It is repeatedly suggested that gothic writers sparked their readers' interest in the irrational at the time when major Western thinkers embraced the idea of progress. This explanation is not entirely convincing. For average people in the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment was a meaningless word. They certainly did not believe that their society operated on some rational principles. So what was so revolutionary about gothic fiction?

In literary terms, the gothic novel was a refreshingly new genre in that it blatantly appealed to readers' voyeuristic fascination with crime. Indeed, *The Castle of Otranto* opened with the assertion that "[t]his work can only be laid before the public at present as a matter of entertainment" (6). The preface in which this assertion was made was strikingly different from what readers of crime literature had been used to. Like prefaces to other crime publications, it insisted on the authenticity of the following narrative, but it did it in a suspiciously disingenuous manner and intentionally casted a shadow of fictitiousness on the entire book. It was even apparent that the author was ridiculing the very notion of authenticity. In this respect, the preface to *The Castle of Otranto* read like a parody of didactic introductions typically found in crime reports.

Their aesthetic appeal made gothic novels even more distinct from other forms of crime literature. They appealed to readers' appreciation for well-written narratives (or to the readers who could at least pretend to appreciate well-written books). Who else had time and patience to suspend their disbelief and enjoy those lengthy novels? As one

contemporary caricaturist suggested, gothic novels were popular only among bored aristocrats, particularly women, who read such “tales of wonder” to escape the monotony of their lives (Fig 6.10). Clearly, this new form of crime literature completely liberated readers from the obligation to take the subject of crime seriously.

But American writers did try to maintain some sense of seriousness. In fact, they thought it was essential for them to do so. The first American gothic novel, Charles Brockden Brown’s novel *Wieland: or, The Transformation* (1798), was a convoluted tale about a misguided religious fanatic who killed his family and then committed suicide. It barraged readers with a plethora of weirdness—ventriloquism, ghosts, perversity, and



Figure 6.10: A late eighteenth-century satire of women reading Gothic novels.

other shockers—which could not help but give the impression that this “extraordinary and rare” story was a work of fiction. But Brown did not want to suggest that the story was completely made-up. As he pointedly indicated, the novel *could* be read as an authentic story because other crimes of this sort happened in the past. It was undeniable that he was guilty of sensationalist excess, but Brown claimed that his strategy was justifiable because he had legitimate goals; his book was meant to highlight “some important branches of the moral constitution of man.” This point was important to make. It was Brown’s way of acknowledging the prevalent didacticism in American crime literature. But, in the sign that didactic spirit was waning, Brown admitted that the book could be “classed with the ordinary or frivolous sources of amusement” (4).

To trace the evolution of the American gothic novel, we can compare *Wieland* to George Lippard’s *The Ladye Annabel; or, The Doom of the Poisoner* (1844). Lippard, an amazingly prolific and patriotic writer, was well known in the antebellum America. He was the author of several historical novels as well as several bestselling urban gothic novels, in which he lamented the downfall of American values by exposing the nastiness of American cities. Occasionally Lippard tried his hand at writing gothic novels, of which *Ladye Annabel* is just one remarkable example.

On the surface, *The Ladye Annabel*, which also came out under the title *The Mysteries of Florence*, relies on tiresome gothic clichés. Set in Italy at the time of the Crusades, it tells the story of a renowned Crusader who, upon his return home, dies under mysterious circumstances. The culprit turns out to be his own brother, a scholar and mystic Aldarin. He is described as a powerful and sadistic magician, who learned his evil art in Syria. The last detail was meant to make him particularly detestable in the eyes of Americans. He is a traitor not only to his family but also to Christ. What he hopes for is absolute power and immortality, in the quest of which he torments and murders scores of people around him.

The fact that Lippard's novel so openly relies on literary clichés reminds us that by the middle of the nineteenth century gothic novels became quite popular. In contrast to their predecessors, antebellum readers seem to appreciate crime fiction as *fiction*. And many of them wanted crime fiction to be sensational, hyperbolic, and utterly unreal. To this effect, *The Ladye Annabel* continuously conjures exotic images of the East, whose unchristian foreignness is meant to be perceived as both titillating and abhorrent.

And yet, fantastic as its subject is, *The Ladye Annabel* reflects many social and political concerns that befell the country in the middle of the nineteenth century. Aldarin's perversity and hypocritical religiosity reminded readers about scores of religious figures who were implicated in various scandals. The weirdness of Aldarin's beliefs, which blended Christianity and unchristian mysticism, was also a reminder of yet another trend which many Americans found alarming—the proliferation of new religious sects and movements, particularly Mormonism, whose rise caused much controversy at the time. What is more, Lippard's gloomy way of writing about medieval Christianity resonated with the anti-Catholic sentiment that engulfed the country in the 1840s and 1850s. The novel's political concerns were even more apparent. Aldarin's usurpation of power from the rightful and noble leader echoed Lippard's (and other Americans') belief that their political elite betrayed the principles of the Revolution and thus threw the country into chaos.

The rise of the urban gothic novel in the 1840s, of which Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1844-5) was the most notable example, was an amazing literary phenomenon that blended Americans' fascination with the extraordinary and their concerns about the state of their country. The two earliest examples of the genre, Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* (1842) and G. M. W. Reynolds' *The Mysteries of London* (1844), were actually imported from Europe, but the domestic variants of the genre, which became known as "city-mysteries," were distinctly American. Their popularity was unprecedented. It is

estimated that at least thirteen American mystery novels were published in 1844 alone.<sup>77</sup> *The Quaker City*, an exposé of the Philadelphia crime world, was a phenomenal success and went on to become one of the bestselling novels of the nineteenth century. Works about other cities were quick to follow: Ingraham's *The Miseries of New York* (1844), Osgood Bradbury's *Empress of Beauty, The Mysteries of Boston* (1844), Buntline's *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1848) and *Mysteries and Miseries of New Orleans* (1851), George Thompson's *City Crimes: Or, Life in New York and Boston* (1849) and *Mysteries and Miseries of Philadelphia* (ca. 1850).

The premise of these novels is fairly formulaic. Each city, however pleasant it seems at first, conceals behind its façade hidden places populated by outcasts and criminals. As if echoing the scenarios of *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*, in which monstrous creatures from the underworld terrorize the innocent, urban gothic novels portray depraved criminals who hide in the depth of the city where they plot to rob, torture, and murder those above. The inferno in which they dwell is continuously repopulated with fallen women, orphans, alcoholics, and the poor who have no other place to go. Typical descriptions of the urban underworld in urban gothic novels, such as "The Dark Vaults" in George Thompson's *City Crimes*, are brutally realistic and unbelievable:

Myriads of men and women dwelt in this awful place, where the sun never shone; here they festered with corruption, and died of starvation and wretchedness—those who were poor; and here also the fugitive murderer, the branded outlaw, the hunted thief, and the successful robber, laden with his booty, found a safe asylum, where justice *dare not* follow them—here they gloried in the remembrance of past crimes, and anticipated future enormities. (132)

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<sup>77</sup> Zboray, R. J. and M. S. Zboray, "The Mysteries of New England: Eugene Sue's 'Imitators,' 1844," in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* (22:3, Sept 2000: 457-492).

For better sensationalist effect, almost each novel of this sort features an unbelievably demonic and heartless arch villain who tyrannically rules the underworld and endlessly menaces the city. In *The Quaker City*, it is Devil-Bug, an amazingly depraved criminal who likes “not so much to kill, as to observe the blood of his victim” (106). Thompson tried to outdo Lippard in *City Crimes*, which followed the adventures of the heartless sadist named the Dead Man.

American urban gothic novels relied on some recognizable domestic tropes. Indian captivity narratives, whose popularity remained strong well into the nineteenth century, were a major influence. The contrast between civilization (Christianity) and the wilderness (heathenism), which is at the center of American captivity narratives, can be related to the contrast between the underworld and everyday reality, which served as a basic formula for urban gothic novels. Among other influences were the reform literature and sensationalist journalism that gained strength in the 1820s and 1830s: anti-prostitution publications, racy newspapers, and religious pamphlets which were designed to expose social problems caused by urbanization and to warn readers about the moral decay of major cities. Controversial reform publications, such as those of the anti-prostitution crusader John Robert McDowall, were quite merciless in their exposure of various social ills and thus promoted many negative stereotypes about American cities. So did the cheap city press, which started to gain popularity in the late 1820s. Such weekly papers as *The Scrutinizer*, *New-York Flagellator*, *Polyanthos*, *The Flash*, and *The Libertine* offered readers lurid reports of seductions, racy crime reportage, and sketches of notorious criminals and libertines. *The Flash*, for example, lured New Yorkers with accounts of “awful developments, dreadful accidents and unexpected exposures” (Dec 15 1841). The front page of *Polyanthos* screamed with provocative captions such as “Horror, Despair and Suicide,” “Outrage of Humanity,” and “Another

Libertine!! Seduction of Two Sisters!”<sup>78</sup>

What gave these crime publications an edge was that they were actually inspired by real life events, particularly astounding events: mysterious and nasty murders, brazen heists, and sensational trials. This was the case with journalism as well gothic novels, in which the line between the real and imaginary was impossible to draw. The 1836 murder of Helen Jewett, a high-class New York prostitute, captivated the nation with the lurid details of her death: her young paramour killed her with an ax and then set her corpse on fire. Crime writers and journalists rushed to satisfy the public’s curiosity about the case, which inspired quite a few fictionalized biographies of the victim, scores of investigative reports, and pamphlets. *The Quaker City* grew out of the 1843 trial of Singleton Mercer, the young man who became famous for killing his sister’s seducer. The mysterious murder of Mary Rogers, the young New York woman whose body was pulled out of the Hudson in the summer of 1841, was even more provocative. Such famous publishers as George Wilkes of the *Police Gazette* and James Gordon Bennett of the New York *Herald* launched their careers by exploiting this case. It also inspired countless works of literary and semi-literary nature, including Edgar Allan Poe’s “Mysterious Death of Marie Roget” (1842-3), J.H. Ingraham’s *The Beautiful Cigar Girl* (1844), Ned Buntline’s *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1848), and *Confession of the Awful Bloody Transactions in the Life of Charles Wallace, Fiend-Like Murderer of Miss Mary Rogers* (1851).

The illusion of factual authenticity was important in documentary works and crime novels alike. In the fact the distinction between them is hard to make. “I have visited every den of vice which is hereinafter described,” claimed Ned Buntline in *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1848). Even though “this book bears the title of a

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<sup>78</sup> My examples rely on the extant publications found at New York Public Library and the American Antiquarian Society. For additional sources, see Patricia C. Cohen’s, Timothy J. Gilfoyle’s, and Helen L. Horowitz’s *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

*novel*, it is written with the ink of truth and deserves the name of a *history* more than that of a *romance*" (5). It was a disingenuous statement, but Buntline felt compelled to make it. Harrison Gray Buchanan echoed it in his scandalous exposé of city crimes entitled *Asmodeus: Mysteries, Vices and Doings as Exhibited by the Fashionable Circles of New York* (1848), which was offered as a "plain unvarnished tale,' of the sins and iniquities of the city of New York," a book of "facts without fiction" (6). The didactic tradition in the United States was in fact so strong that many nineteenth-century crime writers went so far as to condemn the very concept of fiction. Even fiction writers bashed novelists and pretended to be journalists. George Thompson's complaint about fiction, which appears in the opening paragraph of his novel *Venus in Boston* (1849), is typical; he grumbled that works of fiction were "not sufficiently *natural*" and had little to do with "truth and reality" (3).

What is more, both readers and writers were willing to preserve the notion that what they read and wrote was socially important. Like contemporary TV crime shows (*America's Most Wanted*, *Cops*, etc.), which maintain the illusion of social usefulness while indulging viewers' voyeuristic taste for crime, antebellum crime writers claimed that their works were important for the country's wellbeing. Sensational tales about riveting murders, awful rapes, and ingenious crimes were often presented as legitimate inquiries into social problems or religious issues. *Confessions, Trials, and Biographical Sketches of the most Cold Blooded Murderers* (1837), a collection of "startling and authentic narratives," was published for no other reason than to demonstrate what "human passions may do" when people are "unawed by RELIGION" and "unrestrained by REASON" (vi). The editor of *The Lives of the Felons, or American Criminal Calendar* (1849), proclaimed that his book (a compilation of sensationalist crime tales) was meant to promote "honesty and virtue" in its young readers: "This work is . . . offered to the public, not only as an object of curiosity and entertainment, but as a publication of real

and substantial use, to guard the inexperienced from the allurements of vice, and to protect the weak from the flattering temptations that eventuate only in destruction” (iv). Popular novelists used the same approach. Lippard claimed that *The Quaker City* was meant to expose “all the phases of a corrupt social system” in hopes of putting the end to various forms of injustice (2). Buchanan’s comments about *Asmodeus* offer yet another example: “We write not merely for idle talk, but for the understanding of all—from a desire to do good—to promote the ends of Truth, Justice, Equity, Humanity and Right” (25).

We can well imagine that some gullible readers actually approached their task of reading crime novels as a patriotic duty. Some still do. For the most part, however, readers understood that crime books’ claims of authenticity and social relevance were quite meaningless. The *real life* was merely a literary term—the trope American writers were obliged to use to demonstrate their faithfulness to the principles of didacticism which permeated American culture. In *reality*, crime writers went out of their ways to give their narratives a certain sense of literariness and allow readers to appreciate crime literature as literature.

Consider, for example, the notably fictionalized report titled *Trial of the Rev. Geo. W. Carawan, Baptist Preacher, for the Murder of Clement H. Lassiter . . . Together with a Sketch of the Murderer’s Life, and the Tragical Termination of the Trial—His Attempt, in Presence of the Court, to Shoot one of the Council who Appeared Against him on the Trial, and then Killing Himself* (1854). Unlike didactic publications, many of which dwelled on factual records, this one stands apart in terms of its composition. It includes a well-crafted introduction. It skillfully combines commentary and records in the way that made that book pleasant to read. Furthermore, the book goes beyond stating facts or conveying any moral lessons. It includes numerous passages that betray the literary sensibility of its author, who occasionally breaks the narrative with poetic

transgressions. Particularly noteworthy is a description of the culprit's corpse. It is laced with traces of lyricism:

Carawan's body remained for some time, a terrible spectacle, in the court house; his features, which had assumed the expressions of a demon, filling with horror the minds of those gazed upon him. This expression, however, gradually wore off; and after a few hours, yielding to

“Cold obstruction's apathy,”

His face regained its natural appearance, and he presented the usual aspect of a corpse. . . There appeared no rest for him even in death; and, if report be true, the spirit of the murderer has revisited

“The glimpses of the moon,”

For it was said to have been seen on the night of the day in which he killed himself, walking upon the lonely shores of Juniper Bay, making night hideous, and greatly alarming the people of that section. (22-3)

It was obviously not the first time a corpse was described as a beautiful yet upsetting spectacle. American readers at the time were accustomed to reading tedious descriptions of saintly men on their death beds. What makes this pamphlet provocatively noticeable, however, is that the beautiful corpse was that of a criminal, not the victim. One could admire it with impunity, the way one can admire a good crime story.

The publications like *Trial of the Rev. Geo. W. Carawan* often exposed the stylistic inconsistency of antebellum crime literature, which fluctuated between cold-hearted court records and elaborate descriptions that defied the solemnity of this subject with their literary quality. Such tensions are well represented in the book with a loud title *The Life, Trial, Confession and Execution of Albert W. Hicks, the Pirate and Murderer, the Pirate and Murderer . . . Containing the History of his Life from Childhood up to the Time of his Arrest. With a Full Account of his Piracies, Murders, Mutinies, High-*

*Way Robberies, Etc., Comprising the Particulars of Nearly One Hundred Murders* (1860). It includes an amazingly diverse set of materials that reflected different stylistic conventions: an enticing introduction to the case, overly detailed court records, the criminal's confession, a phrenological analysis of his head, a few tasteful illustrations, and a fictionalized account of the culprit's execution. The styles of various segments of the book reflected different literary trends: adventure narratives, sentimental fiction, and many others. It was, in other words, far from being a simple didactic book in that it appealed to readers on many different levels. The lovers of sentimental fiction could appreciate the author's unusually lengthy analysis of the protagonist's emotions and expression of love for his victim. Those who could not stand the rigidity of court records enjoyed some eloquent descriptions that evoked the novelistic style of the day. Those who loved riddles also had reasons to read; they were promised some "several allusions to buried treasure" (84). The following scene, in which the author imagines the thoughts of the doomed pirate who faces his execution, exemplifies the stylistic complexity of this book.

Subsequently he came from the cabin and looked from the windows on the river, evincing no show of feeling. But for the fact that he was known to be the man who was to die, his apparent unconcern for the great event of the day, would not have struck anybody, as he would simply have been set down as one of the crowd of spectators. As it was, known as he was, as Hicks the pirate, whose moments of life were ebbing with every evolution of the paddles that threw back the spray of the hissing water almost in his face—those who saw him wondered, and came, perhaps, reluctantly to the conclusion that the man had no human feeling. Probably those who said so did him wrong, but his coolness and self-possession were at least remarkable, even for a great and hardened criminal. (74)

The author's emphasis on the diversity of the crowd that gathered to witness Hick's execution reflected such works' mass appeal. The description of the people sounded almost like Walt Whitman's hymn to the nation's diversity: "Gamblers, fighting men, ward politicians, reformed drunkards, actors, medical men, city officials, and bogus reporters . . . There were row-boats, with ladies—no, with females of some sort, in them, shielding their complexion from the sun with their parasols, while from beneath the fringes and the tassels they viewed the dying agonies of the choking murderer" (72, 75).<sup>79</sup> It was apparent that crime literature ceased to be strictly moralistic. It was many things at once: voyeuristic spectacles for some, repulsive tales to others. They drew together people in ways that defy characterization.

#### CRIMINAL ADVENTURES

The diversity of the nineteenth-century crime literature would have shocked the Puritans (by then long gone) who introduced crime literature in British America. They would have been even more appalled by the way antebellum writers portrayed criminals. Not only were works about crime becoming less serious about their didactic aims, they increasingly often portrayed criminals as complex characters who escaped readers' disapproval.

This trend is apparent not only in popular biographies of notorious criminals but also in the works of such as pulp novelists George Thompson and George Lippard. On the surface, these authors seemed to follow the common attitude toward criminals by emphasizing their inhumane qualities. Such creations as Devil-Bug, the arch-villain of

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<sup>79</sup> A similar passage appears in *Confessions and Execution of the Pirates, Gibbs & Wansley* (1831), which describes the people who attended the execution: "The bay presented a very animated spectacle, surrounded as it was by hundreds of boats of all sizes, which had landed the persons who were anxious to witness the spectacle" (2).

*The Quaker City*, and the Dead Man, the protagonist of *City Crimes*, embody absolute evil. At least at a first glance. They stand outside of humanity in the same way contemporary crime reporters portrayed all criminals. Devil-Bug, a “deplorable moral monstrosity, who knew no God, who feared no devil,” is portrayed as an shockingly sadistic man who “enjoyed in any deed, marked by especial *cruelty*” and liked “not so much to kill, as to observe the blood of his victim, fall drop by drop, as to note the convulsive look of death, as to hear the last throttling rattle in the throat of the dying” (106-7). The Dead Man, who claimed that he “never had a conscience,” was an equally merciless murderer whose name emphasized his complete lack of humanity (228). But we cannot ignore an occasional light of sympathy which these writers threw on these despicable characters, thus transforming them, even if temporarily, into understandable and sometimes sympathetic characters.

Some writers implicitly or openly justified criminals’ behavior by suggesting that it reflected various forms of social injustice. This would have scandalous in the seventeenth-century New England, where criminal behavior was *always* discussed as a reflection of the original sin. The protagonists of *The Florida Pirate* (1825), a run-away slave who became a criminal, explained that he embraced crime only because he had to escape “[c]ontempt, abject poverty, and the horrors of want” (5). *The Female Land Pirate; or Awful, Mysterious, and Horrible Disclosures of Amanda Bannorris* (1848) and George Thompson’s *Adolene Wellmont* (1853) introduced women who chose the life of crime in response to mistreatment from others. Amanda Bannorris was dishonored by a seducer. Rather than resigning to miserable life of prostitution and poverty (a typical fate of fallen women at the time) but took control of her life by killing her offender and embarking on a gruesome crime spree. Adolene Wellmont, for her part, became a criminal after her father tried to force her to marry an old rich man. Before she was captured, she killed several people who had done her wrong, including her mean-spirited

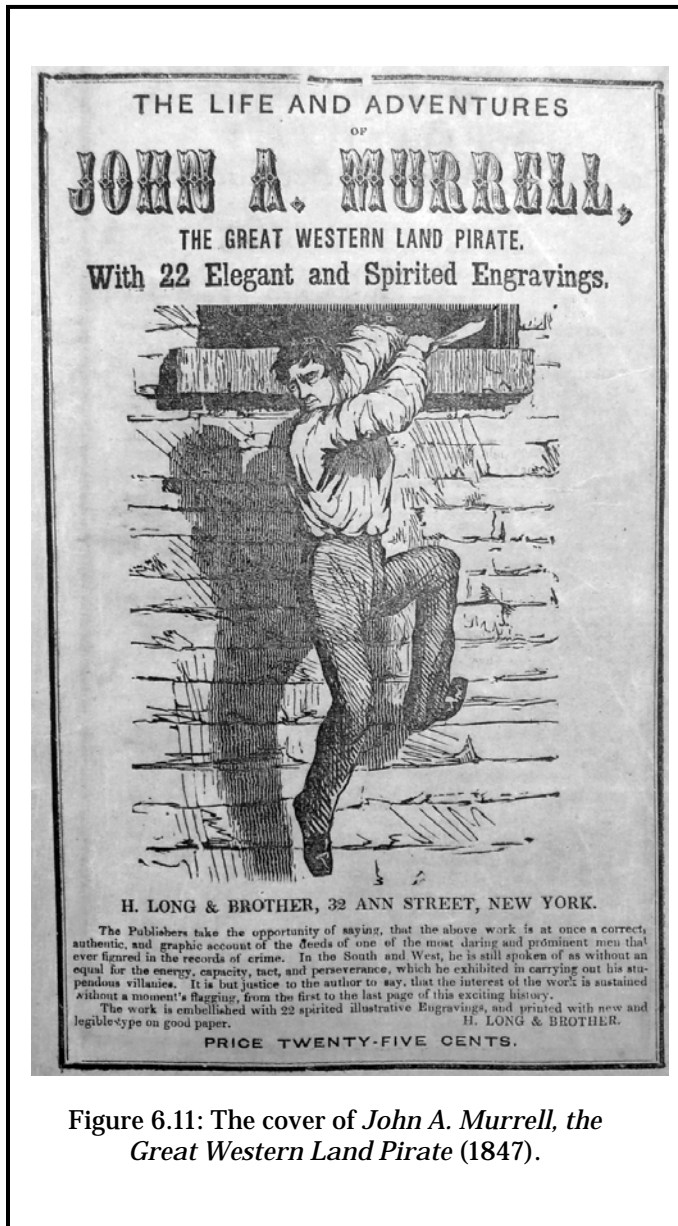


Figure 6.11: The cover of *John A. Murrell, the Great Western Land Pirate* (1847).

fiancé, whom she got drunk and burned alive. Horrible as their crimes were, these women were meant to be perceived as sympathetic rebels against the society that routinely condemned women to misery simply for being women.

Ingraham was even more explicit in his belief that depravity was rooted in social injustice. At times, he even justified those who had to break laws. As he insisted, poverty was not “the sign of depravity. The honest poor of their misfortunes may be compelled to herd with the depraved and outcast of society.

The poor has no choice. He is the

victim of circumstances” (*The Miseries of New York* 11-2). Thompson, while explaining how the Dead Man’s criminal propensities reflected his traumatic upbringing, summed up this idea in one phrase: “The world plunders me—in turn, I will plunder the world!” (*City Crimes* 227).

The concept of crime celebrity lent antebellum crime literature yet another dimension. Glamorous criminals, like the protagonists George Thompson’s novel *The Outlaw, or the Felon’s Fortunes* (ca. 1850), seduced readers with their courage and

beauty, while bewildering moralists who were infuriated about this stubborn trend in American literature. As George Thompson described the protagonist of his novel, he was “a youth of rare personal beauty, possessing a form slender and graceful, yet vigorous, and a faultless countenance, full of expression and fire” (7). In an amusingly telling scene, which was meant to expose Americans’ reverence for famous criminals, a jailer’s daughter is shamelessly professes her love for criminals:

"Oh, how I should like to see him!" cried the young lady, her enthusiasm imparting a rich glow to her dimpled cheeks—"there is something *so* romantic in a handsome robber!—Ah! I adore such fellows as Dick Turpin, Claude du Val, and Jack Harold! I remember, papa, that good-looking pickpocket, English Tom, whom you had in jail some time ago; what a dashing air, and what fine, bold eyes he had! I declare, I quite fell in love with him, and was almost tempted to steal the keys of the jail and let him out. To-morrow, when Jack Harold is taken out for trial, I am determined to have a peep at him, if I die for it!" (12)

Another young woman was equally obsessed with the man for no other reason than his criminal exploits: “The landlord's pretty daughter hurried out in order to obtain a view of the famous young criminal, whose wonderful exploits had already rendered him the hero of her untutored and romantic imagination. Her heart palpitated with mingled love and pity, when she saw Jack's youth and beauty . . .” (64).

The trend of investing criminals with glamorous qualities invariably affected the composition of works about them. The publishing house H. Long & Brother, in the late 1840’s, put out the “The Life and Adventure” series of books dedicated to famous criminals: *The Life and Adventures of John A. Murrell, the Great Western Land Pirate* (1847), *The Life and Adventures of Joseph T. Hare* (1848), *The Life and Adventures of the Accomplished Forger and Swindler Colonel Monroe Edwards* (1848), *The Life and*

**LIST OF BOOKS.**  
FOR SALE BY  
**WM. BERRY & CO.,**  
NO. 17 DEVONSHIRE STREET, BOSTON.

Private Medical Companion.....	50 cents.
Memoirs of an old man of Twenty-Five.....	50 "
Julia King.....	25 "
Demon of Gold.....	25 "
Irish Widow.....	25 "
Evil Genius.....	25 "
Pickpocket.....	25 "
Harriet Wilson.....	25 "
Simon the Radical.....	25 "
Paul the Profligate.....	25 "
Country Girl.....	25 "
Sharps and Flats.....	25 "
Dashes at City Life.....	25 "
Twin Brothers.....	25 "
Outlaw.....	25 "
Criminal.....	25 "
Faub'as.....	25 "
The New York Rock Boy.....	25 "
Amours of Sanfroid and Eulalia.....	25 "
The Mysteries of Women, (plain and colored.).....	25 "
Asmodeus, or the Iniquities of New York.....	25 "

**NEW WORKS BY CHARLES PAUL DE KOCK.**

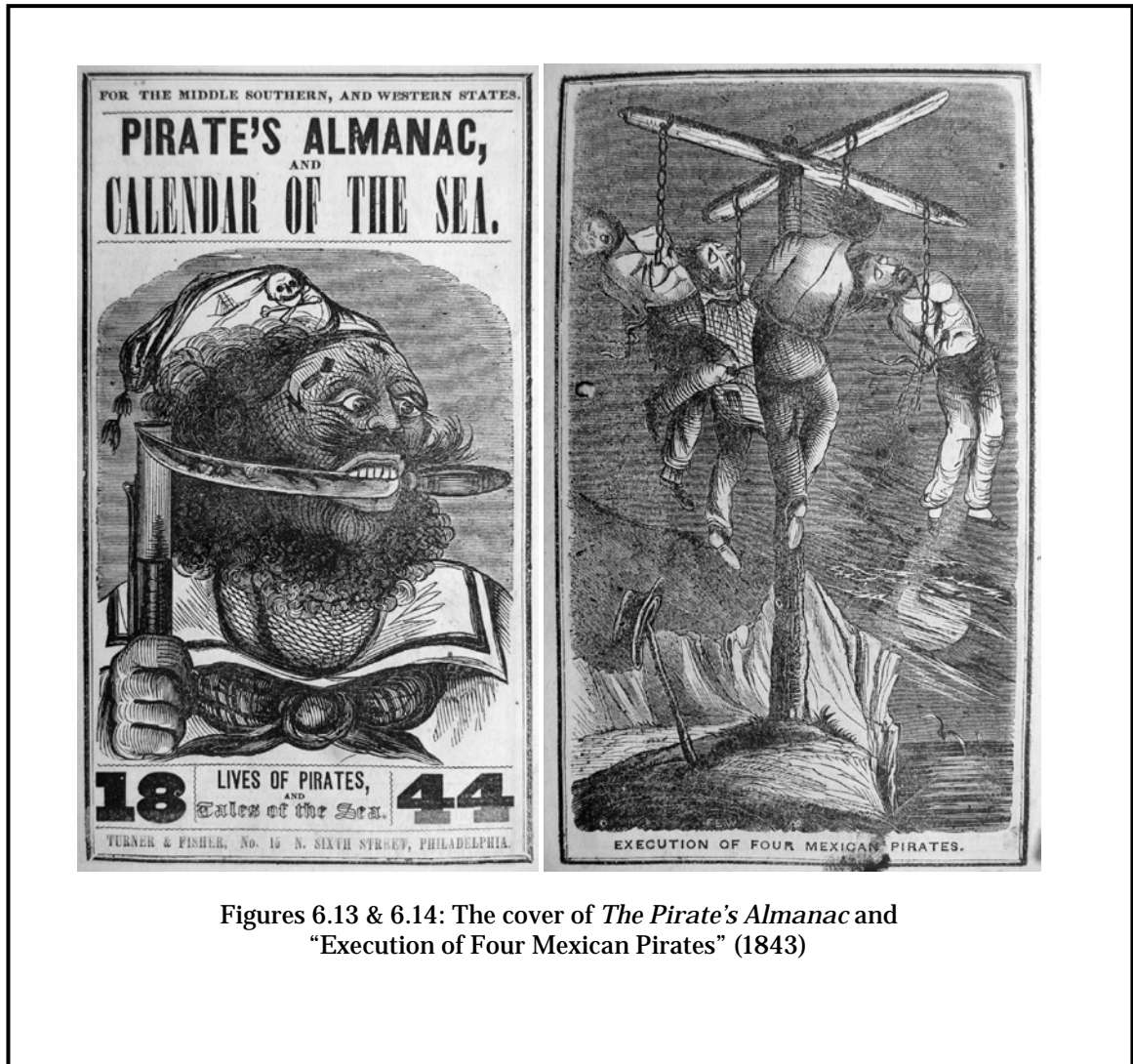
The Mysteries of Venus, or Lessons of Love.....	25 cents.
The Adventures of a Musical Student.....	25 "
The Amours of Lady Augusta Clayton.....	25 "
The History of a Rake.....	25 "
The Secret Amours of Napoleon.....	25 "
Don Pedro in search of a Wife.....	25 "
The Bar Maid of the Old Point House.....	25 "
The Intrigues of Three Days.....	25 "
Tales of Twilight.....	25 "
The Child of Nature Improved by Chance.....	25 "
Julia, or where's the Woman that wouldn't.....	25 "
The Adventures of a French Bedstead.....	25 "
Brother James, or the Libertine.....	25 "

Any four of the 25 cent Books mailed to any part of the United States on receipt of \$1., (post-paid.) All Books and Pamphlets must be pre-paid by us to go by mail.

Figure 6.11: Popular books advertised in flash press (1848).

*Adventures of Henry Thomas, the Western Burglar and Murderer* (1848). Their authors skillfully turned criminal records into elaborate and engaging tales, which were adorned with “elegant and spirited engravings” and other enticing attributes of popular literature (Fig. 6.11). No wonder, those works created such a stir. They added fuel to the endless debates about crime. They also raised the provocative question of what were the appropriate ways of writing about crime. Some moralists were concerned not so much about crime in itself but about how it was discussed in print, particularly what they saw as the stylistic exuberance of crime literature. They rightly feared the tendency of carnivalizing what was once a serious subject and turning

it into a meaningless object of public entertainment. The fact that such works were marketed to the same people who liked to read erotica and other titillating books made it even more apparent that the new forms of crime literature completely departed from the didactic spirit of the neo-Puritan sensationalism (Fig. 6.12).



Figures 6.13 & 6.14: The cover of *The Pirate's Almanac* and "Execution of Four Mexican Pirates" (1843)

We can conclude this chapter with a few odd but noteworthy examples that reveal the extent of literary experimentation in antebellum crime literature. The trend of juxtaposing diverse stylistic and ideological components was occasionally taken so far, that some authors had no sense of ideological and stylistic consistency in their works. Their ways of conflating incompatible concepts, such as entertainment and death, humor and terror, seemed so strange that their readers were simply not sure whether to be amused or appalled.

One of such literary oddities is *The Pirate's Almanac, and Calendar of the Sea* (1844), a shamelessly sensationalist book that fed readers' obsession with crime and

piracy (Fig. 6.13). Like many other works which we discussed earlier, it juxtaposes different ways of writing about these subjects, mixing didactic and voyeuristic characteristics. What is amazing, however, is the extent to which this book pushed many stylistic and structural contradictions into the open.

As its illustrations show, *The Almanac* awkwardly mixes morbid and comical, highlighting the stylistic tensions in literature of this kind. The cover, for example, features an amusing yet menacing image of one Casper Heldt. The stories and illustration included in it point in different directions. One of them (“Execution of Four Mexican Pirates”) depicts a rather gruesome image of four hanged men. The other (“A Horrible Massacre on Board of the Dolphin”) begs for a different reaction by turning a massacre into a caricature (Figs. 6.14 and 6.15). How was one to read the book? Was it a comical parody of the traditional pirate narratives or a serious and thought-provoking work?

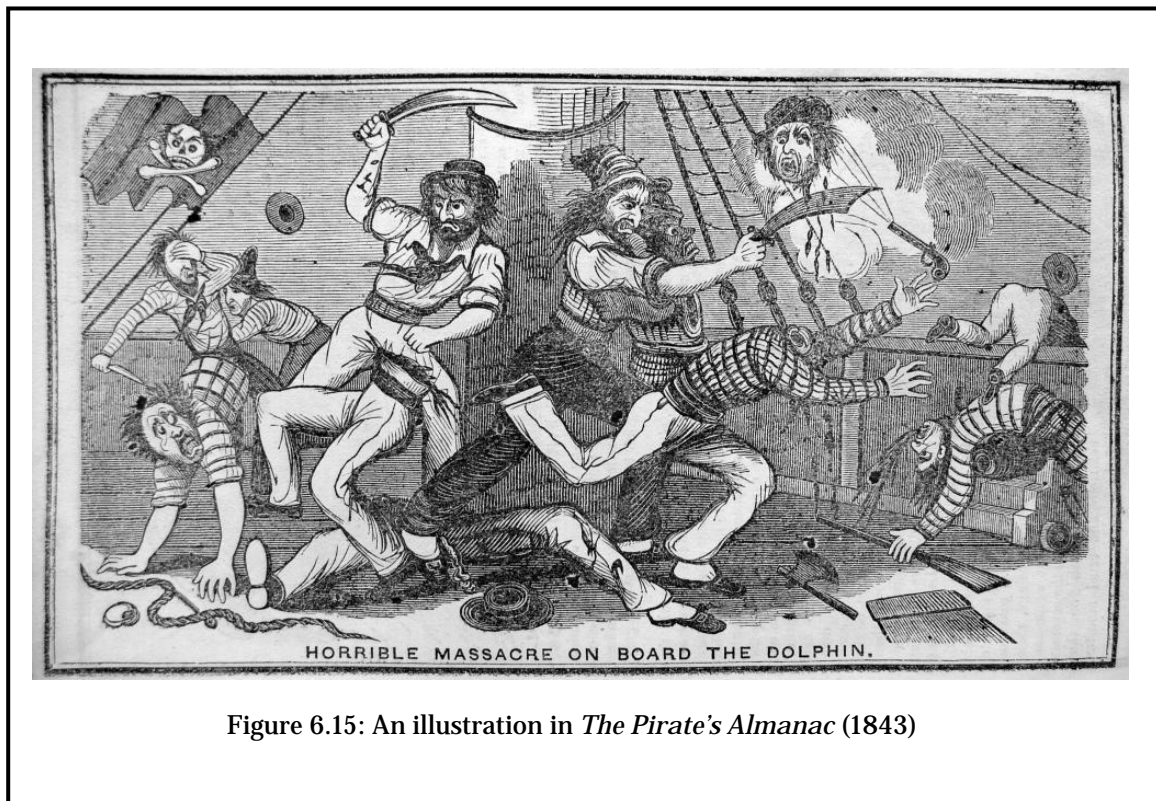


Figure 6.15: An illustration in *The Pirate's Almanac* (1843)

*The Almanac's* composition and structure are equally puzzling. It is notably shapeless in its range of materials, which are nonetheless organized with some sense of order. The book's style, as if reflecting the diversity of the content, sharply varies from page to page. The figures of mangled but still dancing corpses, which appear in one of the images, can serve as metaphors of the book's contradictions. One man, cut in two, tries to run away while leaving his bottom half behind. The severed head of another man looks in dismay at the scene. Body parts litter the deck. The symbolism of this image can even be extended to the contradictions of early American crime literature in general, which increasingly often seemed like a meaningless massacre of different forms of writing.

## CHAPTER VII

### EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE ABOUT SEX

“That the knowledge of the secrets of Nature is too often abused by many persons, I readily grant, and think it very unfortunate that there should be a generation of such profligate persons in the world . . .”

*Aristotle's Masterpiece*, 1684

**Précis:** The evolution of American literature about sex, which this chapter traces, was in some respects very similar to the development of American crime literature. At first, the subject of sex was addressed in what can be considered legitimate forms of writing (scientific, medical, and didactic literature about sex). With time, the sensationalist appeal of this subject encouraged other ways of exploiting it, inspiring works that appealed to readers' aesthetic sensibilities and interest in the titillating. These developments could not help but spark tensions between proponents of different approaches to writing about sex. In the United States, these developments were particularly remarkable because they reflected cross-cultural tensions between mainstream American writers, who gave the impression that they adhered to didactic literary conventions, and their European counterparts, who were often accused of exploiting sensationalist topics, including sex, for titillating purposes.

In 1744, when New England was still recovering from the religious upheavals of the Great Awakening, the Reverend Jonathan Edwards, who was often decried as a religious provocateur, had to confront a strange case. It was brought to his attention that some young men in his parish got into the habit of reading some obscene book. A quick investigation revealed that the book in question was *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, an English manual for midwives. The masterpiece had obviously nothing to do with Aristotle. It was published anonymously in the late seventeenth century in England as an ostensibly legitimate publication, similar to many other medical works of this nature, and very quickly became popular for its frank discussion of sex matters. What made *Aristotle's Masterpiece* different from other books on midwifery, as Edwards quickly discovered in his investigation, was that its content was rather ambiguous. The book gave the impression that it was a medical text, but it could easily be read as a source of titillating pleasures. One could find in it everything from detailed descriptions of female reproductive organs to case studies of deformed children. The fact that some young men in Edwards's town were so fond of the book left no doubt that *Aristotle's Masterpiece*—at least the edition Edwards expropriated from the young culprits—was an illicit book. Or so it seemed.

A provocative subject, as I suggested earlier, turns into a scandal not only because of its content but also as a consequence of our disagreements about ways of confronting it. Sex in itself, whatever it may be, is not particularly scandalous. What fuel sex scandals are conflicts over ways of turning sex into words. In this respect, sex scandals should be regarded as rhetorical phenomena. They are collisions of various forms of writings about sex, such as bawdy, scientific, moralistic, and pornographic literature, which highlight the differences of readers' interpretive strategies. What is

difficult and intriguing about sex literature, therefore, is a profound sense of indeterminacy of its purpose and the lack of stable genre distinctions within it.

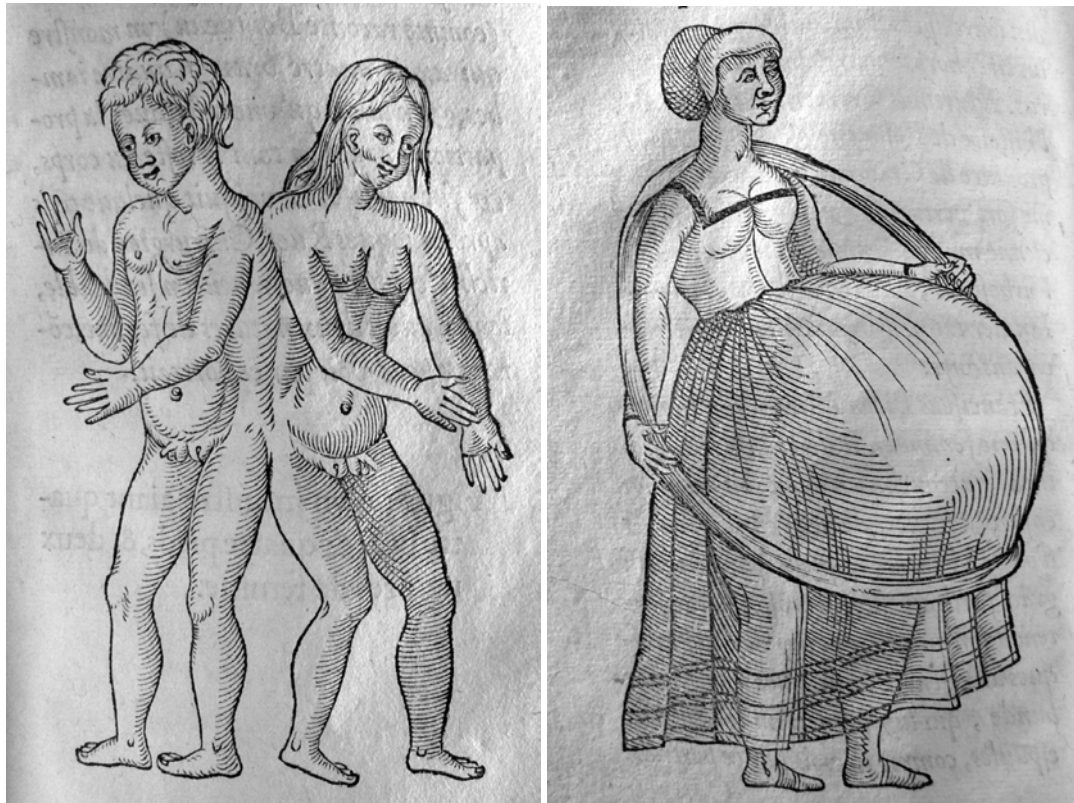
As a point of departure, we can delineate three basic forms of sex literature, which were commonly evoked in debates about its legitimacy: *medical*, *didactic*, and *voyeuristic*. The former treats sex mainly as a medical subject. It is represented in a wide range of educational publications, focusing on such areas as sexual wellbeing, procreation, and venereal diseases. Didactic literature about sex emphasizes moral, religious, and legal dimensions of people's sex habits, most notably sex crimes and misdemeanors. In their most basic form, didactic publications serve as warnings about the dangers of sexual promiscuity by investigating particularly scandalous sex crimes and their repercussions. Finally, the voyeuristic trend in literature about sex is apparent in the works that turn sex into a subject of voyeuristic delight. Such works are usually read not for the sake of medical information or didactic messages but any other way that can make this subject enticing to readers. This approach, as we will see, liberated sex literature from the rigid rhetorical conventions of didactic and medical works and promoted experimentation that reshaped many literary conventions.

While acknowledging the basic characteristics of these categories, we should of course recognize that as a whole, literature about sex is an extremely variegated genre. Its various subgenres often escape accurate classification, because they routinely conflate different rhetorical conventions.

Early modern sex literature, particularly the publications intended for a wide audience, was already remarkable for its juxtaposition of various strategies of addressing this subject. Unlike typical medical treatises, which had a specific sense of purpose and style, such works tended to diversify their content to make themselves more appealing to their readers. The works of such writers as Ambroise Paré (1510-90) and the

anonymously published *Aristotle's Masterpiece* (1684), for example, blurred the lines between the notions of medical, sexually-illicit, and voyeuristic.

Let us take, for example, Paré's *Deux livres de chirurgie* (1573), which had an enticing subtitle *De la génération de l'homme, & manière d'extraire les enfans hors du ventre de la mère, ensemble ce qu'il faut faire pour la faire mieux, & plus tost accoucher, avec la cure de plusieurs maladies qui luy peuvent survenir*. Its author was a fairly respected surgeon—his serious scientific intentions should not be doubted. What is noteworthy, however, is that the book was intended not only for medical students but also for those with some sense of curiosity about strange things. Paré focused his



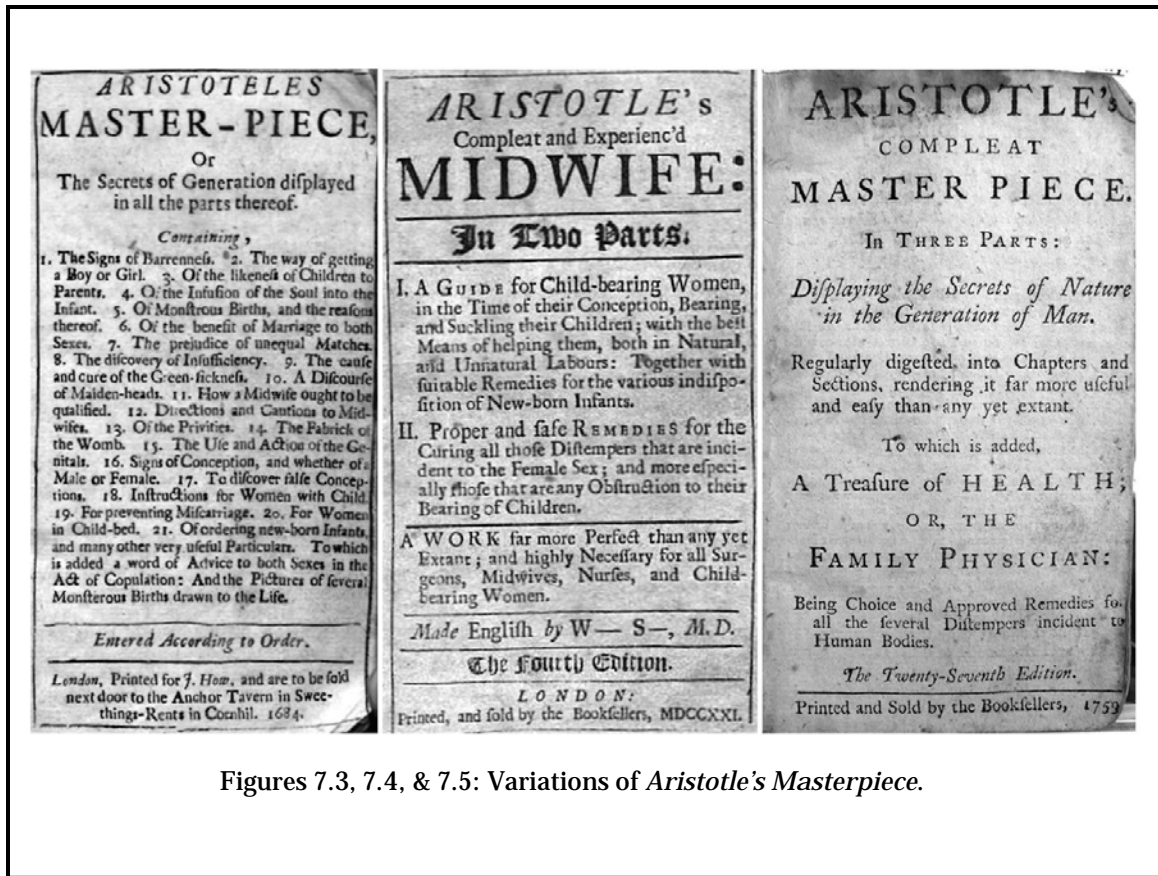
Figures 7.1 & 7.2: Illustrations in Paré's *Les Ouvres* (1585).

attention on exceptionally curious cases, such as a woman who was pregnant with thirty-six children or conjoined hermaphrodites. To make the book more accessible, it was conveniently divided into short, manageable parts and was lavishly illustrated with images of biological curiosities (Figs. 7.1 and 7.2). Thus Paré skillfully combined scientific and voyeuristic elements. He insisted on treating sex as an object of scientific inquiry, while at the same time exploiting various cases for their entertaining value.

Various editions of *Aristotle's Masterpiece* pushed this strategy even further. The book, which has nothing to do with Aristotle the philosopher, was first published in 1684 as a manual for midwives and physicians. On the surface, it can be grouped with other works of this sort, such as John Sadler's *The Sicke VVomans Private Looking-Glasse* (1636), *The Expert Midwife, or An Excellent and Most Necessary Treatise of the Generation and Birth of Man* (1637), Nicholas Culpeper's *Directory for Midwives* (1651), *The Compleat Midwives Practice In the Most Weighty and High Concernments of the Birth of Man* (1656), and Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book* (1671). Some of these texts were inspired by respected medical books from the continent such as *De conceptu et generatione hominis* (1580).<sup>80</sup> But *Aristotle's Masterpiece* was not a conventional medical text. It promised readers information about all sorts of sex-related questions: how to discern signs of sexual maturity, the mysteries of conception, how to deliver a child, what causes deformities, and "a word of Advice to both Sexes in the Act of Copulation." The book, which was published as a cheap, pocket-sized volume, was an instant success—to a large extent because its author, who chose to remain anonymous, emphasized the titillating aspects of sex. He facetiously declared that his book might "fall

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<sup>80</sup> We can also relate *Aristotle's Masterpiece* to such medical classics as Jacopo Berengario's *Isagoge brevis* (1522), Andrea Vesalius' *Tabulae sex* (1538), and Charles Estienne's *La Dissection de parties du corps humain* (1546), which made significant contributions to medical science and sexual matters. For a detailed discussion of these texts see the "New Science, One Flesh" chapter of Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990).



Figures 7.3, 7.4, & 7.5: Variations of Aristotle's Masterpiece.

into the hands of any obscene Person,” but considering its obscene character, he was amusingly dishonest (4).

The 1684 edition was followed by a number of other editions; all of them were published under the pseudonym “Aristotle” and varied according to the whims of its nameless editors. As we can see from the cover design of different editions, some of them appealed to readers who treated medical literature as pornography while others exploited their fascination with strange things (particularly monsters). A few versions of the book actually gave the impression that they were strictly medical in their content (Figs. 7.3, 7.4, and 7.5).

The book became well-known precisely because it could be (and usually was) read as a compilation of bizarre medical cases and enticing anatomical details, which publishers made sure to flaunt. The question whether the *Masterpiece* was an obscene book or a serious medical treatise caused more than one controversy. The one that took

place in Connecticut in 1744 was only one of many cases in which the authorities were not sure how to judge the book. *Aristotle's Masterpiece* was not illegal. Its content could be deemed medical. Was it, then, appropriate for young men to read it? Could the authorities prosecute the book's readers for misusing it? It was, ironically, the revivalist provocateur Jonathan Edwards, whose works were so often misused and misinterpreted, who had to confront this issue in New England. The best solution he could come up with was to reprimand a few young readers for indulging in inappropriate reading, but he failed to resolve the question of how to treat such publications.<sup>81</sup>

Many medical works about reproduction, venereal diseases, and sexual dysfunction could not help but acquire scandalous reputation, particularly in the cases when publishers made efforts to reach a wide audience. John Marten's *Treatise of all the Degrees and Symptoms of the Venereal Disease in Both Sexes* (1708) and John Sintelaer's *Scourge of Venus and Mercury* (1709) offers some examples of how the subject was made appealing to the average reader; in addition to discussing medical problems, the writers enlivened their books by offering historical lessons about the spread of venereal diseases in Europe and by including various case histories (or anecdotes), which could be read simply for pleasure.<sup>82</sup> James Parsons, for his part, exploited the sensational subject of androgyny in the book titled *Medical and Critical Inquiry into the Nature of Hermaphrodites* (1741). He was also diligent enough to dilute medical discussions of the subject with interesting deviations, including a wide range of historical cases and their legal repercussions. This publishing trend did not go unnoticed by the authorities, which on more than one occasion prosecuted publishers for printing

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<sup>81</sup> The episode is discussed in more detail in Thomas H. Johnson's "Jonathan Edwards and the 'Young Folk's Bible'" (*New England Quarterly*, 5 [1932]: 37-54) and Ava Chamberlain's "Bad Books and Bad Boys: The Transformation of Gender in Eighteenth-Century Northampton, Massachusetts" (*The New England Quarterly*, 75. 2 [2002]: 179-203).

<sup>82</sup> Other publications of this kind included Nicholas Robinson's *New Treatise of the Venereal Disease* (1736) and E. Jourdan de Pellerin's *Treatise on Venereal Maladies* (1750).

such pseudo-medical books. In the case of John Marten's *Gonosologium Novum: or, A New System of all the Secret Infirm and Diseases, Natural, Accidental, and Venereal in Men and Women* (1709), which was denounced as "a scandalous book," the author was indicted for "being evil disposed and wickedly intending to corrupt the subjects of the Lady the Queene" (Foxon 13).

No other medical work intrigued and scandalized the public more than George Sewell's translation of Johann Heinrich Meibomius's *Tractatus de Usu Flagrorum in re Medica et Venerea* (1643), which came out in England under the title *A Treatise of the Use of Flogging in Venereal Affairs* (1718). Although it was published by the notorious London bookseller Edmund Curll, what gave the book the air of seriousness was that it appeared in the same format as many contemporary medical works. Its author, as the cover proclaimed, was a medical doctor. The translator, whose name was not mentioned, was described as a physician. These details notwithstanding, the book was hardly medical. It starts with a discussion of ways to improve the circulations of blood in genitals and offers some theories on how whipping and other ways of inflicting pain can be successful in curing various distempers of the body and the soul, including epilepsy, servants' laziness, lunacy, and children's incontinence. Then, as the title promises, the book turns to the benefit of whipping in the "venereal affairs." There readers can go over some captivating examples to learn about various ways of treating sexual dysfunction and infertility: penis-enlargement procedures by "stinging the Parts with young Nettles" (6), examples of women who were "rais'd and inflam'd by Strokes to a more easy Conception" (17), and cases of men who regained their sexual potency in masochistic sessions.<sup>83</sup> There was something admirable about the author's way of moving from one case to another with amazing shamelessness that could actually pass for scientific love of

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<sup>83</sup> Pagination is not consistent throughout the work; each section is paginated as a separate work.



Figure 7.6: Frontispiece to *A Treatise of the Use of Flogging in Venereal Affairs* (1718).

facts. What is more, the author irreverently juxtaposed references to such respectable writers as Aristotle, Plutarch, and even the Apostle Mark with, for example, stories about men who found “a Delight in the midst of Torture” (8) and boys who learned to stimulate each other sexually by “the Titulation of Stripes” (14). The eighteenth-century readers must have been amused and bewildered by Meibomius’ way of quoting the masters in such a strange context to create an amazingly unpredictable but enjoyable text. As a bonus, *A Treatise of the Use of Flogging* ends with “A Treatise of Hermaphrodites.”

The intended ambiguity of the book’s purpose reflected a larger trend in European literature: proliferation of structurally, thematically, and stylistically ambiguous works that blended different methods of writing about sex. The ambiguous content of Curll’s publication is in fact well reflected in the book’s front-plate that captured the uncertainty of its genre (Fig. 7.6). In the forefront one can see a maid flogging a man whose wife is waiting for him in bed. The image goes along well with one of the main points of the book, the medicinal use of flogging as a treatment for sexual dysfunctions. There is, however, a minor but important detail that betrays the book’s voyeuristic character. There are the two men, behind the window, spying on the flogging session. It is not clear whether they express interest or dismay, but what their presence implies is that a medical session like this one could also be perceived as an object of curiosity. The drawing subtly captured the uncertainty of the genre and particularly of the book like this one. It was clear that apart from its medicinal uses it could be simply appreciated an object of voyeuristic delight.

What we can discern in such playful ambiguity is a nascent sense of literariness as a hybrid rhetorical form—a conflation of various forms of writing. Edmund Curll’s publication record confirms the indeterminacy of conventions, his literary aspirations, and the complexity of the notion of the literary at the time. In addition to drama and poetry, he published seemingly serious works on religion, geography, medicine, history,

and politics. He always, however, crowned the catalogues of his books with such sensationalist titles as *The Cases of Impotency and Divorce; A Compleat History Magick, Sorcery, and Witchcraft*; and *A History of the Rosicrucian Doctrine of Spirits, viz. Sylphs, Salamanders, Gnomes, and Daemons; The Art of Midwifery Improv'd . . . Illustrated with 38 Cuts Curiously Engraven*; and *The Nun in her Smock, or Venus in the Cloister*, which landed Curll in court to earn what became the first conviction for obscenity in England. One particularly interesting work, *Eunuchism Display'd: Describing all the Different Sorts of Eunucks*, which also appeared under the title *Italian Love*, perfectly exemplifies the literary complexity of Curll's publications. It was, all at once, a romance, a history lesson about different traditions that practiced castration, debates about the gender status of eunuchs, and their rights in the face of law.<sup>84</sup>

A similar literary trend could be observed in publications about sex crimes, which grew out of the rich tradition of serious didactic literature about the dangers of sexual proclivities and trial reports about sex crimes and misdemeanors. An important contribution to the genre was made by the pseudo-moralistic publications inspired by various sex scandals. As we saw in the Chapter III, court proceedings of various crimes were routinely printed in cheap pamphlets, ostensibly to warn the readers' about the dangers of crime. Readers found sex crimes particularly interesting. In the eighteenth century booklovers could easily spot the covers of cheap pamphlets with stories about sodomy, rape, incest, and bestiality committed by aristocrats and clergymen. There was also *The Newgate Calendar*, a collection of vaguely moralistic tales based on scandalous English trials that included a section on adulterers, rapists, and other sex fiends. The most elaborate publications of this kind combined diaries, testimonies, love poetry, and

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<sup>84</sup> Most of these titles are listed in the promotional pamphlet "A Catalogue of Books; All Pinte'd for E. Curll at the Dial and Bible against St. Dunstan's Church in Fleetstreet," which was issued sometime around 1718. For more examples of Curll's publications, see Paul Baines's and Pat Rogers's *Edmund Curll, Bookseller* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

confessions, which one could enjoy without paying much attention to their occasionally moralistic tone.

It is hard to say at what point this tradition of moralistic sensationalism shed its didactic overtones. In the late seventeenth century, in the reign of the libertine king Charles II (1660-85), English publishers brought out several pseudo-moralistic pornographic works, most of them “done out of French.” France was, after all, the great source of moral corruptions where the most adventurous English publishers found inspiration for their publications.<sup>85</sup> In the early 1680s alone, they printed several pornographic works: *The School of Venus* (1680), *The Whores Rhetorick, Calculated to the Meridian of London; And Conformed to the Rules of Art* (1683), and *Venus in the Cloister, Or the Nun in her Smock* (1683), a translation of Jean Barrin’s *Venus Dans le Cloitre ou La Religieuse en Chemise: Entretiens Curieux* (1683). Those works openly satirized didactic conventions in that they were written as instructional dialogs between teachers and their pupils but dealt with the art of love. The instructress in *The Whores Rhetoric*, “one of the first rate Whores” in London, undertakes to teach her young protégé not only to “enjoy the effects of Nature[']s bounty” but also to make a living as a prostitute (19). *Venus in the Cloister*, for its part, recalls a dialog between two young lascivious nuns who mix discussions of religion and politics with demonstrations of various sex techniques.

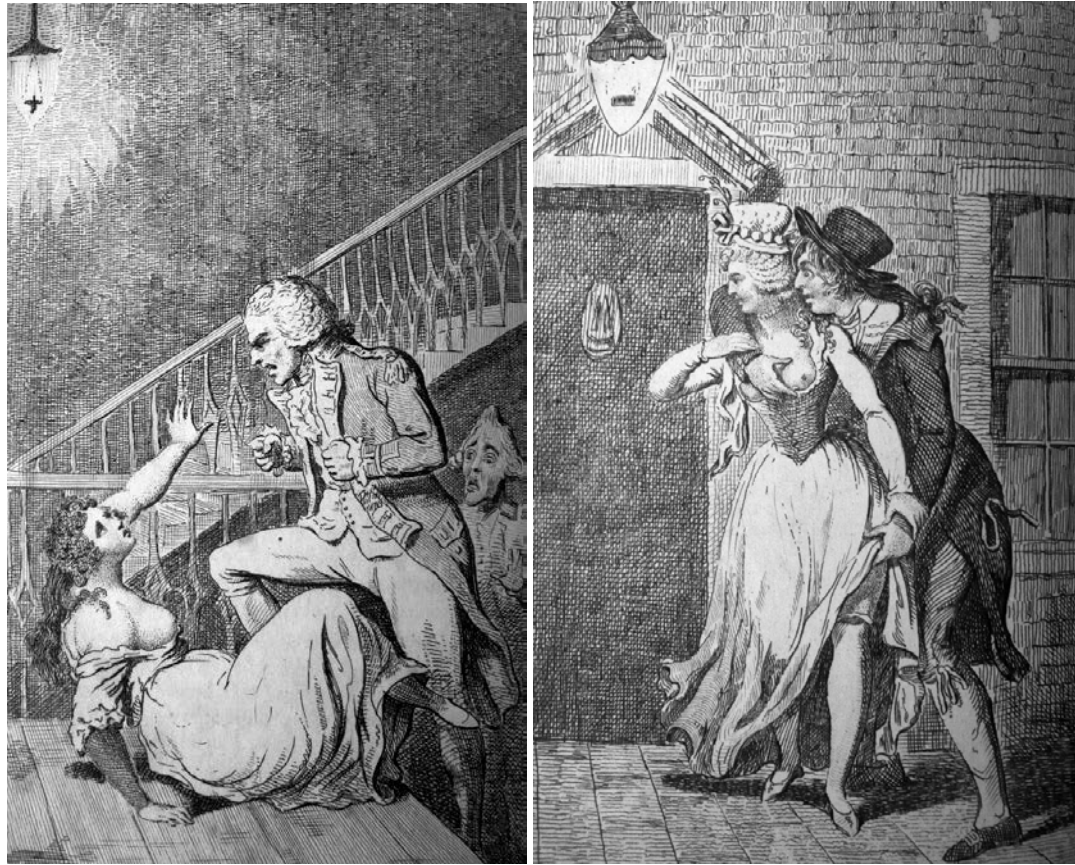
Such openly pornographic books were quite memorable but fairly rare, at least when they started to appear in England. But there were plenty of other erotic books, although not as racy, clearly abandoned the tradition of annoying their readers with tedious moralizing. In one early eighteenth-century work, Alexander Smith’s *The School of Venus, or, Cupid Restor’d to Sight; Being a History of Cuckolds and Cuckold-Makers*,

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<sup>85</sup> For a succinct survey of the late seventeenth-century French pornography, see Earl Enix Tidrow’s “Claude le Petit (1638?-1662) and the Libertine School” (M.A. Thesis, Washington University, 1941).

*Contain'd in an Account of the Secret Amours and Pleasant Intrigues of our British Kings, Noblemen, and Others* (1716), the author seemingly felt compelled to denounce vice before indulging readers with amusing tales of human corruption, including “the Lives and Amours of the most celebrated Beauties of the Female Sex, who had been the admired Mistresses or Concubines of Kings, Princess, Dukes, Earls, Lords, and other eminent Persons” (a3). He promised “a favourable Entertainment among all such active Spirits as are inclin'd to Love and Gallantry,” but warned his readers that “Vice stands not on the same Level with Virtue” (a3-4).

By the end of the century, such morally ambiguous books became even more common. The author of *The Cuckold's Chronicle; Being Select Trials for Adultery, Imbecility, Incest, Ravishment, & c.* (1793), a two-volume collection of eclectic stories about sexual proclivities, crimes, and misdemeanors, went out of his way to exploit the public's fascination with sex crimes while emphasizing his utter indifference to didactic conventions. The writer of *The Chronicle* was a man of Ovid's sensibility—he simply refused to be dull while writing about sex crimes and misdemeanors. He promised his readers “scenes of wickedness and criminality, of brutality and lust, of farcical absurdities, and ridiculous propensity” (1.iii). The table of content, arranged alphabetically for better search, covered the entire spectrum of titillating subjects, including “Rape, length of time in committing one,” “Marks and Stains,” “Private Parts of a Woman sewed up,” “Impotency, opinion of French lawyers upon it,” “Hymen, or Mark of Virginity, how lost,” and “Opposition and Retaliation to cruel Husbands.” The book, lavishly illustrated with racy images, appears even more sensational because it links sex and crime (Figs. 7.7 and 7.8).



Figures 7.7 & 7.8: Illustrations in *The Cuckold's Chronicle* (1793).

The author started the book by expressing his hope that readers would overlook the seriousness and gravity of the subject: “Our grand object will be to present to the Public, a series of circumstances of such mingled seriousness and absurdity, such criminal turpitude, and such ridiculous weakness, comprising scenes so widely ridiculous, and so extravagantly absurd, as must arrest every attention, and furnish food for every disposition” (1.iv). In other words, the author gave his readers absolute freedom to read the account of sex crimes in any way they wanted:

To the youthful, the gay, and the fashionable, the scenes of frolic and amusement, of subterfuge and intrigue, of art and of temptation . . . will supply an inexhaustible fund of amusement, and afford a species of

relaxation, conveying more instruction for the use of domestic life, than the most austere dogma of morality can offer. To the men of a serious and contemplative turn, this Work will not be without its use: the lessons of morality we shall occasionally intersperse, will, in concert with their own reflections, supply a fund of argument highly gratifying to philosophical minds . . . . From such men, we naturally must expect the warmest patronage, and consider their approbation of our plan, as the best evidence of the warmth they feel for the welfare of their country. (1.v)

The last line was probably meant as a joke.

The important thing for writers like this one was not to be gloomy. *The Cuckold's Chronicle* actually opened with a complaint that many books about sex crimes were boring. They were “the vehicle of facts neither extraordinary nor important” and got caught in “the perpetual recurrence of the dull stile of legal procedure” (1.iii). Charlotte Smith, in the preface to her translation Pitaval’s *Causes Célèbres* (1777), a French collection of stories about various crimes relating to matrimony, also expressed her dismay at what she called the artlessness of some works about sex crimes. She complained that Pitaval’s book was needlessly rigid:

the facts are often anticipated, and often repeated, in almost the same words, in different parts of the story: they are also often interrupted by remarks, or by relations wholly foreign to the subject, by which the attention is bewildered and the interest weakened. I found, indeed, so many minute and unnecessary details, and so much improper and ridiculous description, intermixed with the most pathetic events, that I was sometimes on the point of relinquishing my undertaking. (1.vii-viii)

To remedy the situation, Smith’s heavily modified translation of *Causes Célèbres*, which appeared under the title *The Romance of Real Life* (1787), and gave her readers what

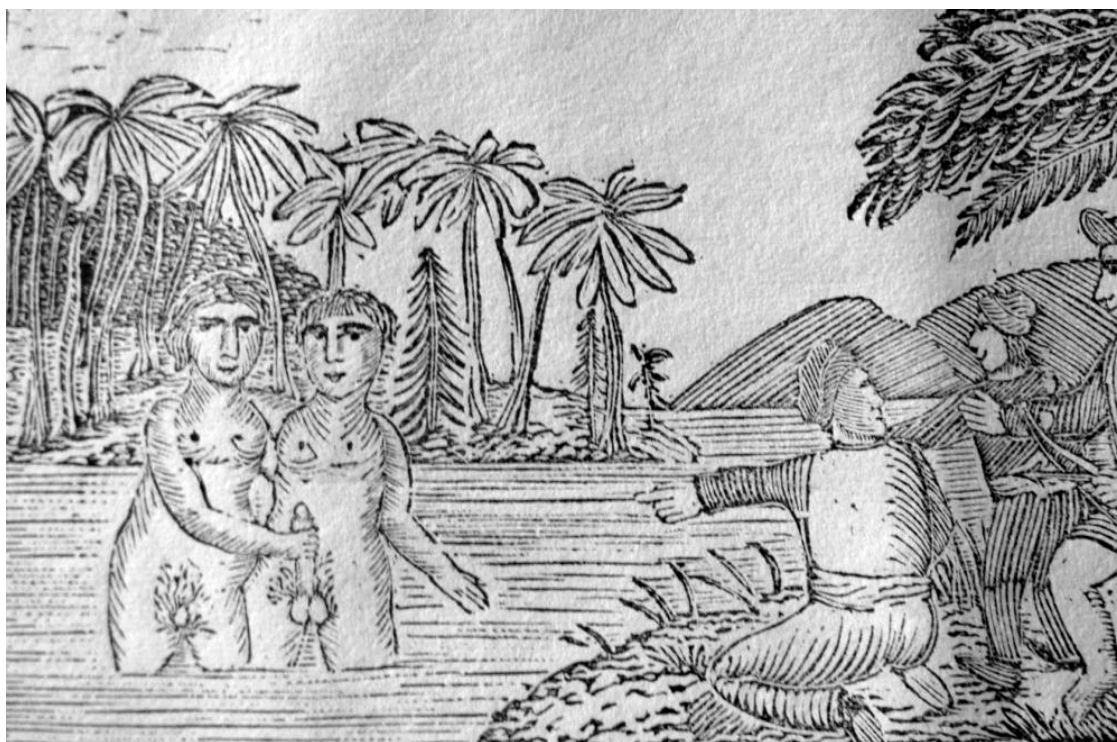


Figure 7.9: An illustration from an early American edition of *Fanny Hill* (1832).

they expected from a sensationalist work: a pseudo-documentary collection of stories that could be read for pleasure.

By the second part of the eighteenth century, English writers routinely indulged readers with erotica without justifying their interest in the subject. While some conservative and inept writers who wrote about sex still felt compelled to frame their works in didactic terms, many others did not seem to tolerate didacticism at all. The narrator of John Cleland's infamous *Fanny Hill* (1748-9) teases readers with the voyeuristic scenes of "stark naked truth" in her sex odyssey through London (39). The short praise of virtue at the end of her bluntly pornographic confession usually goes unnoticed—particularly in the editions ornamented with distracting images (Fig. 7.9). In *The Mysteries of Venus* (1783), which appeared under the pseudonym Miss Kitty Pry, the young female protagonist recounts her different domestic occupations while secretly

observing her aging masters' sex lives. As she plainly states, her book was published "for the benefit and entertainment of mankind in general" (3). She did not burden readers with tedious moralizing at all.<sup>86</sup>

The voyeuristic character of English erotica was reflected in contemporary popular art. The works of the provocative English artist Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) offer some good examples. Many of his sexually explicit prints depict people caught in *flagrante delicto*: sailors with prostitutes, young men debauching maids, priests with their female parishioners, and pupils seducing their teachers. Such images clearly evoked the situations which were common in didactic sensationalist pamphlets in that they exposed the duplicity and hypocrisy of people's sexual behavior. Rowlandson, however, clearly departed from the didactic tradition by openly satirizing it.

What Rowlandson apparently despised was that moralists who exposed scandalous behavior of others expected their readers to have a specific and uniform reaction of dismay and condemnation. It was this aspect of didactic sensationalism which Rowlandson satirized in such drawings as "The Finishing Stroke," "A Snip in a Rage," "Connoisseurs," and "A Milk Sop."

"The Finishing Stroke" immediately catches the eye with a frank depiction of two people having sex. But the image is noteworthy for other details: the people who spy on the couple. The manner in which they are depicted recalls the didactic tradition. They feel compelled to express dismay at what they see. The man in the portrait, mounted right above the love-making scene, is seething with indignation. The two men, who burst

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<sup>86</sup> For other examples of English erotica and pornography of this period, see David Foxon's *Libertine Literature in England: 1660-1745* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1965), Roger Thompson's *Unfit for Modest Ears: A Study of Pornographic, Obscene and Bawdy Works Written or Published in England in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century* (Tokowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), and Julie Peakman's *Mighty Lewd Books: The Development of Pornography in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). The latter is particularly informative about the diversity of the eighteenth-century English literature about sex, much of which, as the author demonstrates, originated on the continent.



Figure 7.10: Rowlandson's "A Snip in a Rage" (1802).



Figure 7.11: Rowlandson's "A Milk Sop" (1811).

into the room, go out of their way to express shock. In “A Snip in a Rage,” the intruder is even more bewildered (Fig 7.10). The old woman who finds a young couple of fornicating in a barn has a pair of scissors ready to castrate the man. What is remarkable, of course, is that Rowlandson made these dismayed intruders look like fools. Their reaction is just a rehearsed farce, an expression of quaint puritanism. If anything, Rowlandson seemed to have suggested that the viewer should not look at his work the same way.

The secondary characters in Rowlandson’s drawings, which include not only voyeuristic intruders but also clueless dogs, indifferent cats, and other creatures, play an important role. They reveal the range of reactions one can have to the provocative scenes in Rowlandson’s drawings. As Rowlandson implied, we can compare or contrast our reaction to those of the secondary characters in his drawings. We can appreciate the artist’s skills, his satirical streak, pornographic explicitness, or simply dismiss his works as uninteresting. “The Dairy Maid’s Delight,” for example, depicts an intentionally provocative scene of interracial sex. Instead of rousing some sense of moral indignation, however, it assumes the viewer’s simple appreciation of scene. The man is casually lifting the maid’s dress for his and the viewer’s benefit, while the cat next to them is indifferently lapping the milk. The image creates a contrast between its racy subject and the assumed complacency of the viewer’s experience. It allows us to look at the image without expressing condemnation typically required in strictly didactic publications.<sup>87</sup>

What is so liberating about Rowlandson’s approach is not so much the sexual explicitness of his images but the implication that the spectators can decide for themselves how to look at the scenes he depicts. He wanted to dispel the notion that one

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<sup>87</sup> Bradford K. Mudge argues that the ambiguity of Rowlandson’s art was actually far larger: “The interpretive challenge here—how does one properly differentiate the pornographic from the satiric?—quickly becomes inextricable from a series of larger historical and critical problems: Did the pornographic imagination in the visual arts emerge from the satiric? If so, when? Under what conditions? Is Rowlandson’s work representative of a key shift in the cultural marketplace? How much do we actually know about the ways in which these prints were circulated? Can we better approximate how these prints functioned during the later Romantic period?” (Sec. 2).

was required to look at provocative images solely to condemn them. What his works suggest is that one can watch them without the moral burden of shame. The reaction which his works solicit is not some kind of moral indignation but a simple delight in a chance to witness something unusual—a purely voyeuristic pleasure watching images that capture the spontaneity of unique of moments. Liberation of the voyeuristic and aesthetic delight from the clutches of shame is probably the most important aspect of Rowlandson's art.

#### EUROPEAN EROTICA IN BRITISH AMERICA AND THE UNITED STATES

In British America, literature about sex was not particularly diverse. While European writers experimented with different forms of sensationalism and created erotica and pornography amazing for their sense of complexity and literariness, their American counterparts remained committed to the neo-Puritan tradition of didacticism. As the tradition dictated, people's emotions can be stirred only for an expressly legitimate purpose, not for the sake of aesthetic delight or voyeuristic pleasure. Consequently heavy didacticism—genuine or not—became one of the most apparent characteristics of American literature, which many writers learned to enact in order to distance themselves from what was perceived as pernicious influence of libertine and lascivious literature from Europe.

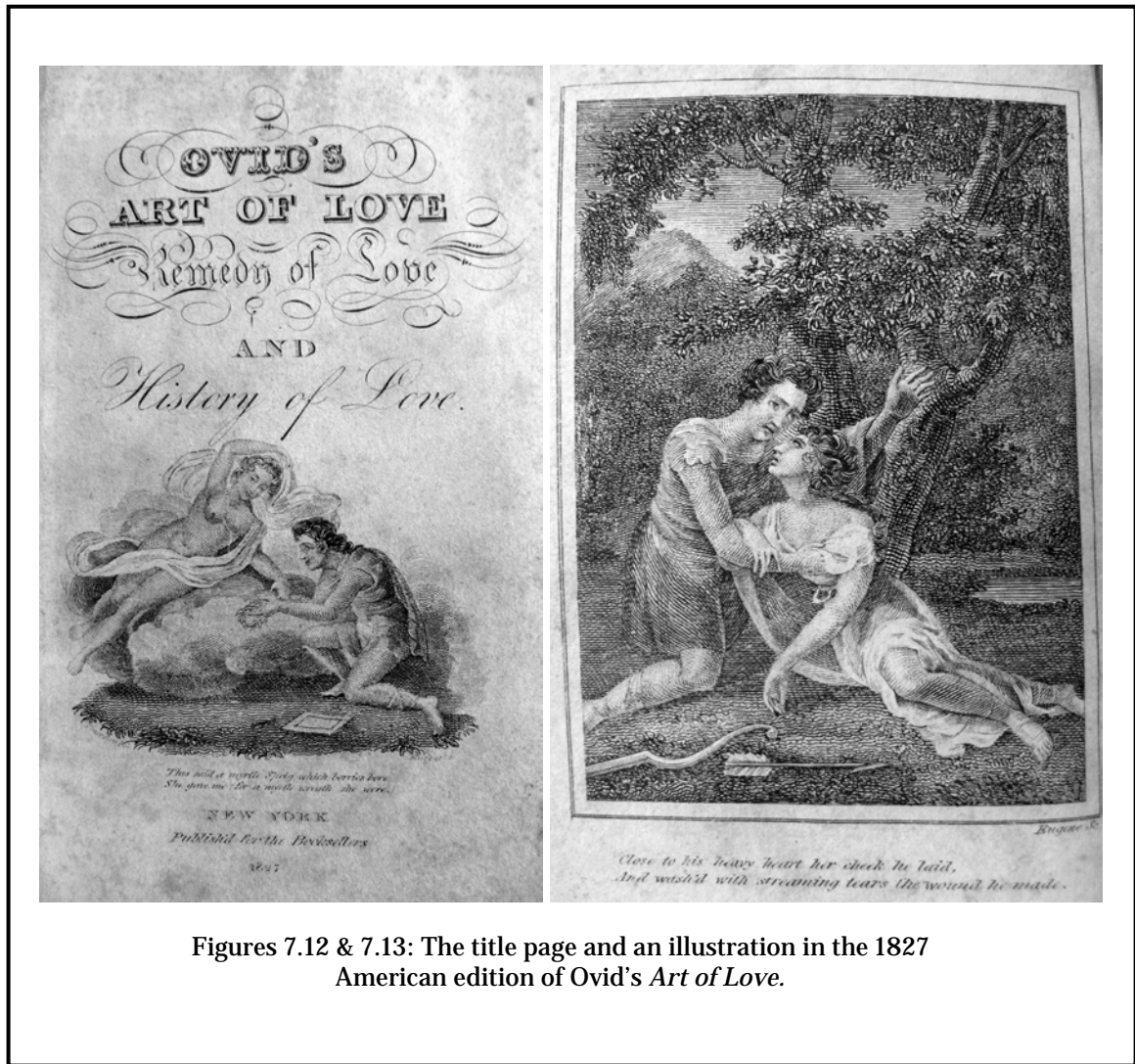
It would be nice—for research purposes—to find a racy pornographic book written in the colonial period, but we are so far out of luck. What counts as early American sex literature? The diaries of Michael Wigglesworth, in which he listed (not even described) young men he fantasized about, and Joseph Moody, another secretive diarist, who recorded in coded Latin every occasion he masturbated. We also have several sermons about the dangers of fornication, which were delivered on occasions of

culprits' executions for various sex crimes. Those few publications, which we looked at in Chapter IV, were awfully didactic. In contrast to European literature about sexual transgressions, American publications could never escape the gravity of the occasions that inspired them. The stories of English rakes and womanizers, as we saw earlier, often grew into elaborate tales that could be easily appreciated with negligible sense of guilt. Early American writers, on the other hand, did not seem to have that luxury. More often than not, the stories of those who were guilty of sex crimes followed copious rhetorical conventions of guilt-ridden confessions, condemnation of "guilty pleasures," and expressions of "anguish, sorrow, fear and shame" (*The Dying Criminal*). Those who wrote such works did not aim high in terms of style, nor did they even want to be recognized as writers. They were, first and foremost, moralists. They insisted that their works were meant to be nothing more than "lessons" and "warnings" to others. The style of such publications varied from one form to the other but it had to remain unmistakably somber and exclude all satirical, voyeuristic, and aesthetic elements. The following lines from *The Dying Criminal* (1779), which were presumably composed by a young man who awaited execution for raping a twelve-year-old girl, perfectly reflect the spirit of early American sex literature:

These lines I write within a gloomy cell,  
I soon shall leave them with a long farewell;  
Again I caution all who read the same,  
And beg they could their wicked lives reclaim.

It is not an exciting story.

American readers who wanted something more titillating had to avail themselves to European imports, but only a few were lucky enough to get what they wanted, for such imports were not readily available everywhere. Booksellers Philadelphia, that cauldron of intellectual diversity, had a lot to offer. As early as the 1750s, Clare Lyons writes in her



Figures 7.12 & 7.13: The title page and an illustration in the 1827 American edition of Ovid's *Art of Love*.

study, one could find there, if one tried, anything from bawdy almanacs to European racy novels and prints.<sup>88</sup> Booksellers in other American cities lagged behind for legal reasons, but occasionally risked selling what moralists termed obscene books.

Lascivious tales from antiquity—works of Ovid, Propertius, Petronius, and Apuleius—could be published without legal hurdles. Their American editions were based on those from Europe. Sometimes they even sported “splendid engravings” of erotic nature to appeal the readers who did not necessarily care for Propertius’ lyricism and Ovid’s dated jokes (Figs. 7.12 and 7.13).

<sup>88</sup> Clare A. Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender & Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia: 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill, 2006): 115-84.

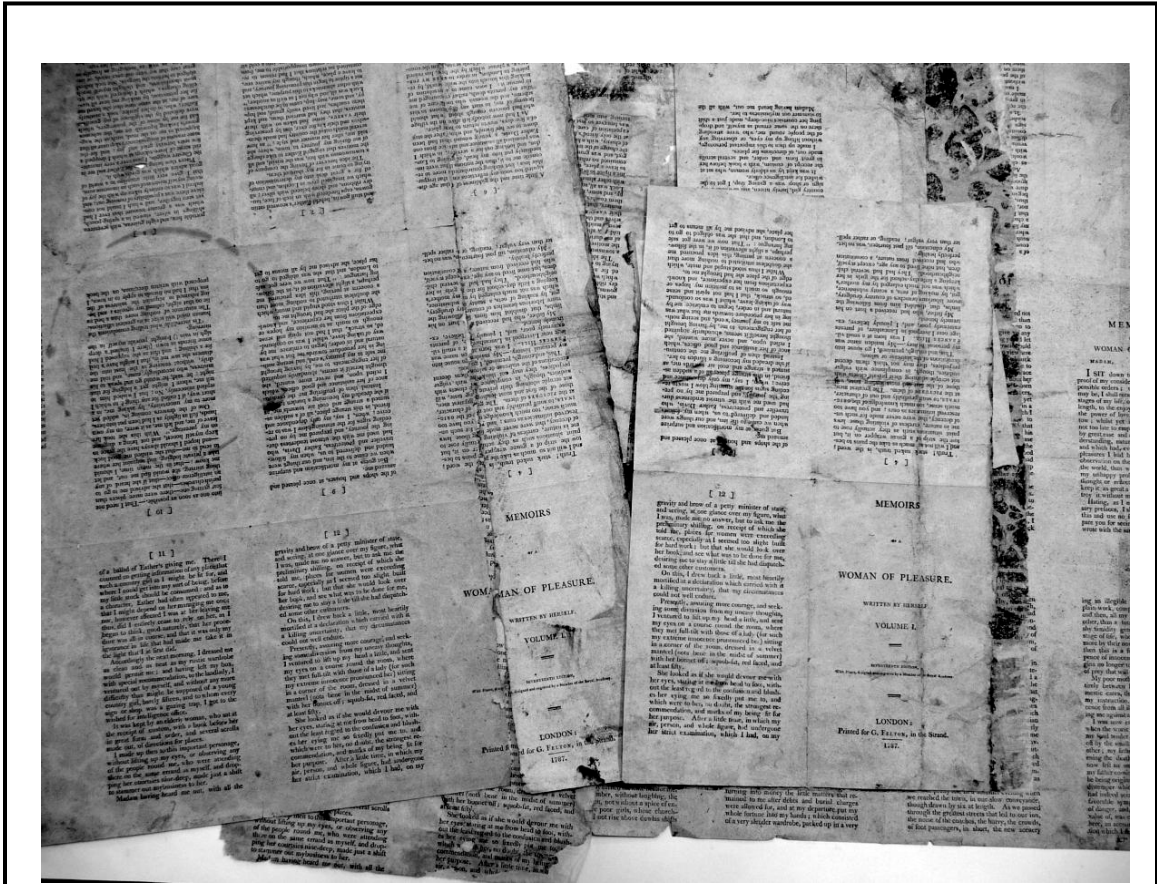


Figure 7.14: Remnants of the first American edition of *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* at the American Antiquarian Society.

Racy novels were harder to publish and sell openly—at least at first. The first known American edition of Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), which follows the amorous adventures of an English pastor, appeared in New York in 1795. Its frontispiece featured a fairly explicit image of a man groping a young woman. Apart from this detail, the book did not cause much controversy. John Cleland's stunningly pornographic *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-9), however, created a trail of scandals right after it appeared in the United States.

We do not know for sure who tried to publish the first American edition of Cleland's novel. Even the circumstances surrounding the publication of the earliest

extant edition remain murky. The one published around 1810 in Massachusetts is sometimes attributed to no one than Isaiah Thomas, a prominent publisher who operated in Worcester, but this hypothesis is not entirely convincing. To avoid prosecution, the mysterious publisher designed the intentionally misleading title page stating that the book was published in London, in 1795, not in the United States in 1810. The trick did not work, and he had to abort the project for fear of prosecution. The edition's only remnants—a few sheets of uncut paper—are all that survive (Fig. 7.14). Several years later, in 1821, another Massachusetts printer, Peter Holmes, tried to publish the book again but was convicted of promoting obscenity. It was not till the twentieth century when American publishers could openly print Cleland's novel.

For the lack of better options, Americans with penchant for pornography had to resort to reading erotic novels, seduction tales, and other works of that sort. Luckily, there were plenty of those, particularly by the middle of the century. Antebellum America was awash with “fancy goods,” as Americans called imported erotica and pornography. In the words of one contemporary commentator, New York was flooded with “the most disgustingly obscene works that have ever been issued from the Paris and London presses, accompanied with plates too filthy for description” (*London v. New York* 44). Some authors were widely known. The notorious Irish dancer and courtesan Lola Montez distinguished herself as writer with such works as *Anecdotes of Love: Being a True Account of the Most Remarkable Events Connected with the History of Love, in All Ages and Among All Nations* (1858) and *The Arts of Beauty: Or, The Secrets of a Lady's Toilet* (1858). The racy novels of Charles Paul de Kock, whose sexually suggestive penname was meant to give a good idea about his writing, were so popular that their importation created an industry of its own and even inspired a number of American imitators. Many works, however, appeared anonymously. Book advertisements in the so-called flash press listed many enticing titles such as *The History of a Rake* (“the



Figure 7.15: An illustration in the 1845 American edition of Wilson's *Woman of Fashion*.

Adventures, Amours, and Intrigues of a General Lover, or Ladies' Gentleman, with many colored amatory illustrations"), *Adventures of a Bedstead* ("containing many singular and interesting and amorous tales and narratives, particularly Lord K---'s Rapes and Seductions, Peep into a Seraglio, Intrigues in a Boarding School, London Licentiousness Displayed, and forming one of the most moving histories ever displayed to the public of amours in high life"), and *Memoirs of Harriet Wilson*.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> The announcement appeared under the heading "Works of Wit, Fancy, and Humor" in George Thompson's *Mysteries of Bond Street* (1857) and "Books that are Books" in *The Broadway Belle* (Sep 10 1855: 4). Donna Dennis's *Licentious Gotham: Erotic Publishing and Its Prosecution in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) mentions the titles of several other European imports: *Memoirs of the Life and Voluptuous Adventures of the Celebrated Courtesan Mademoiselle Celestine of Paris*; *The Cabinet of Venus Unlocked*; *The Curtain Drawn Up, or, The Education of Laura*; *The*

The latter, not to be confused with her American namesake, was a publishing phenomenon in her own right. A career courtesan, Wilson became famous for her affairs with high-ranking politicians and aristocrats, including the Prince of Wales. Her literary career started when, in need of money and misled by her lovers, she decided to publish a tell-it-all memoir. The book was, needless to say, scandalous. It made its way to the American shores to the delight of many readers, who had even more reasons to rejoice when publishers went on to put out various spin-offs based on Wilson's confessions. The images in one of them say a lot about the books' appeal and the essence of European erotica. They mix elements of crime, sex, and luxury, which reminding us that erotic art was regarded as both enticing and dangerous. It is not a coincidence that seductions were usually perpetrated in rooms ornamented with paintings of nudes (Fig. 7.15).

In the 1850s the ranks of New York scandalous publishers was enriched with the arrival of one Calvin Blanchard, who became notorious as both a publisher of controversial European thinkers and contentious writer. As an essayist, he promoted all sorts of provocative ideas. A strong believer in free love, he maintained that "the whole aim, and object, and motive, of all the beings or creatures who exist or can possibly exist" is to "fully gratify the senses" (*Love among the Nymphs*, "Good" 1). In utterly unchristian terms, he added that "the 'salvation' of mankind . . . depends solely and entirely on the establishment of a social reorganization that shall remove all obstructions . . . from the free gratification of the amorous desire" (*Love among the Nymphs*, "The Tell-Tale" 7). He also believed that the institution of marriage was unnatural and survived only because people found outlets in adultery, prostitution, and masturbation. "Love, *not* 'morality,' nor the so-called 'religion,' is the supreme, 'higher law' principle," he argued. "Venus, the inseparable ally of Nature, is bound to have her way" (*Love*

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*confessions of a Voluptuous Young Lady of High Rank; The Lustful Turk; and The Amorous History and Adventure of Raymond de B— and Father Andouillard.*

*among the Nymphs* n.p.). To the average American reader, Blanchard exemplified the worst kind of European decadence that threatened to destroy their virtuous Christian republic.

The European books Blanchard chose to publish in America were deemed subversive. They included such European philosophers as Auguste Comte and Ludwig Feuerbach, whose ideas about religion many Americans found wacky. He adored Thomas Paine and embraced other notorious free-thinkers of his age. His list of publications also contained a section he called a “library of love,” in which he included the works of Ovid, Petronius, Boccaccio, and Dryden as well as such titles as *Secret History of a Votary of Pleasure* and *The Art of Real Pleasure*. Apparently, he believed that Americans could loosen up by learning to appreciate sex and pornography without shame.

Erotic and pornographic prints were plentiful and, depending on their raciness, sold either clandestinely or in the open. Cheap reproductions of paintings of nudes led the liberalization trend in American publishing. Images of naked women, quite common in art but till then confined chiefly to art collections, could now be found on the streets (Fig. 7.16). The market of pornographic images and obscene artifacts imported from Europe—what George Thompson prudishly described as “immodest productions of the French school”—thived in spite of their illegality (*Venus in Boston* 13). Such items could be obtained in many places, as long as one knew where to look for them: “There are stores devoted to the sale of fancy goods—and there are refreshment saloons on Broadway and elsewhere, which have *private doors*, known only to the initiated: and those private doors communicate with passages that lead directly to the apartments wherein lewd revels are held” (*The Broadway Belle*, Jan 22 1855).



Well-to-do customers enjoyed a wide selection of expensive prints and objects, including “obscene snuff-boxes, with false tops or covers, musical boxes of similar construction, and . . . pictures and albums of a similar character, some of them executed in a superior style, and valued at from \$25 to 60” (“Destruction of Indecent Prints”). There were also plenty of fairly cheap prints, which were sold by young peddlers “at all hours round hotels, steam-boat docks, rail-road depots, and other public places” (Sanger 521).<sup>90</sup> When in 1842 Congress banned importation of images which were deemed obscene, American publishers eagerly met their compatriots’ demand for pornography with vigorous domestic production. What is remarkable, however, is that even American

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<sup>90</sup> See also John Robert McDowall’s reports in *Memoir and Select Remains of the Late Rev. John R. M'Dowall* (New York, 1838): 222-3, 253, 294, 338.

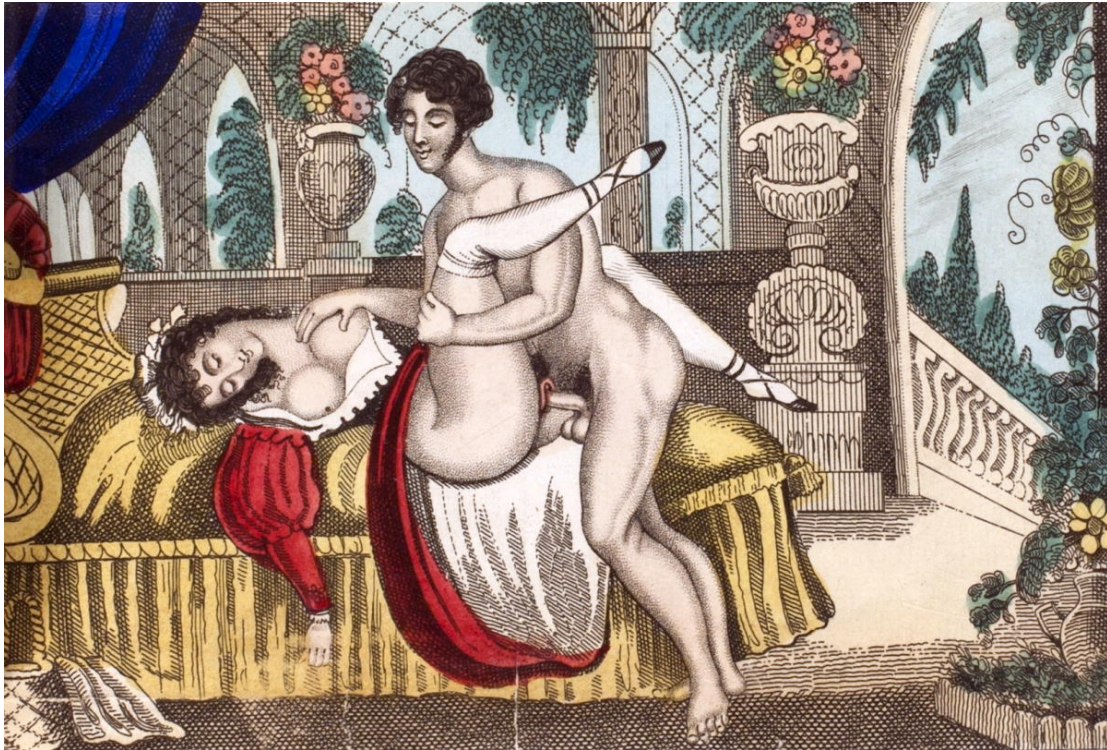


Figure 7.17: Pornography confiscated by New York police in 1850.

pornography was designed to give the impression that it was manufactured in Europe. After all, Americans preferred to regard pornography as a European invention (Fig 7.17).

The popularity of the *tableau vivant* shows, yet another European import, which in American cities were better known as the “Model Artists” exhibitions, also betrayed Americans’ fascination with European erotica. They were introduced in New York and other American cities in the late 1840s. In their most recognizable form, *tableaux vivants* were still displays of actors replicating familiar episodes from literature, sculpture, and painting. The scenes were elaborately arranged, artfully illuminated, and sometimes accompanied with music to give the impression that the *tableau vivant* was a respectable art form. The exhibitions were in fact often marketed to “connoisseurs and gentlemen of taste” (“Temple of the Muses!!”).

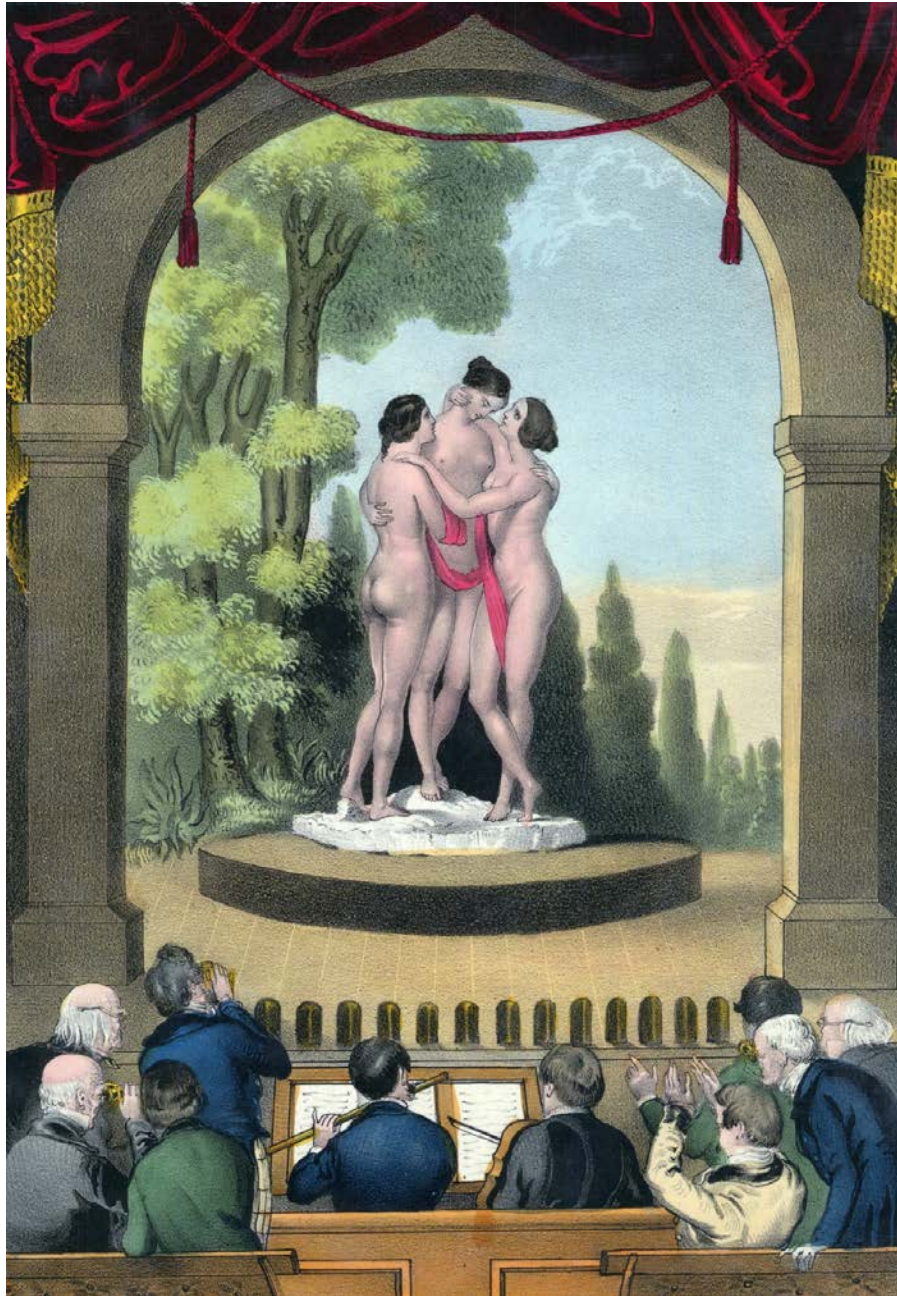


Figure 7.18: “The Three Graces as Exhibited by the Model Artists of New York” (1848)

What American commentators were of course quick to observe was that such exhibitions were merely cover-ups for licentiousness. The most popular *tableaux vivants* staged in New York were advertised under such sexually suggestive titles as “Adam’s

First Sight of Eve,” “Three Graces,” and “Venus Rising from the Sea.” Their lascivious appeal was undeniable. The actors on stage were nude, or nearly nude. Their appearance and poses were often meant to be sexually enticing. One report in *National Police Gazette* aptly described them as “the little naked nymphs who nightly exhibit themselves to the lovers of the classic and the antique” (*National Police Gazette*, Feb 26 1848: 98). George Foster, in another contemporary account, observed that *tableaux vivants* had absolutely no aesthetic value whatsoever. The models were tramps. The people in the audience were voyeurs who hid their proclivities under the cloak of sophistication. He described them as follows:

[They were] the worn-out rakes and sensualists, the ambitious young libertines and hypocritical old lechers, who sneak into these exhibitions, spy-glass in hand, to gloat over the salacious developments of the poor models who are thus forced by necessity or a beastly shamelessness, to expose themselves to public gaze for a few dollars a week. (*New York by Gas-Light* 16)

At least on one occasion, the authorities felt compelled to shut down an exhibition because it was deemed obscene.<sup>91</sup> The coverage of the scandal in press reminded New Yorkers that there was a wide gap between their fascination with European novelties and American sense of propriety.

American writers defended their turf by denouncing European imports and professing their cultural patriotism. The latter often consisted of affirming their allegiance to the neo-Puritan tradition of didacticism, which prompted some American moralizers not only to express their disdain for erotica but also to condemn any form of literature that drew attention to style at the expense of meaning. The idea that books and

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<sup>91</sup> Jack W. McCullough’s “Model Artists vs. the Law: The First American Encounter,” in *Journal of American Culture* 6.2 [1984]: 3-8.

shows should never be an object of aesthetic delight was amazingly common and was promoted by writers of all calibers.

Professional moralizers such as William Alcott and Lydia Child repeatedly expressed their concern about the corrupting effect of fiction, particularly romantic fiction. Alcott's *Young Man's Guide* directly stated that fiction was dangerous. Amorous fiction, which supposedly promoted sensuality in readers, was considered particularly detrimental. To make his case, he quoted famous Timothy Dwight: "The numbers of the poet, the delightful melody of song, the fascination of the chisel, and the spell of the pencil, have been all volunteered in the service of Satan for the moral destruction of unhappy man" (302). It was believed that once young readers start reading novels, "it is difficult to tell to what an excess they may go" (202). The anti-prostitution crusader John Robert McDowall was equally disdainful of the authors whose stylistic concerns eclipsed their didactic message. He ridiculed the young readers who carved "the 'Pelham,' 'Devereaux,' and 'Faulkland' novels" that romanticized illicit love affairs (27). Lydia Child, for her part, bitterly complained that "the circulating libraries have been overrun with profligate and strongly exciting works" that have "a most unhealthy influence upon the soul" by causing "bodily intoxication," "weakness," and "delirium" (*The Mother's Book* 93).<sup>92</sup> Like McDowall, she blamed *foreign* writers for their corrupting literary influence in America.

Religious moralists were particularly furious about the diminishing interests in religion and the growing popularity of sentimental literature, which was widely regarded as a European invention. The American Tract Society, famous for its evangelical efforts, published several instructional tracts that compared fiction, particularly romances, to "ardent spirits" and "poison" concocted by "men who are known to be lax in principle,

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<sup>92</sup> See the "Books" chapter of Child's *The Mother's Book* (1831).

and loose in life” (Gutjahr 71).<sup>93</sup> “We have been amazed at the stupidity of our countrymen on this topic,” wrote another disgruntled correspondent. He imagined that proliferation of fiction would soon “undermine half the churches of the land” and “render half the statues of our courts nugatory” (“Books which are Books” 521). The threat of subversive literature was believed to have emanated precisely from Europe, prompting some American writers to lash against “the infidel writers of the present day,” particularly that new idolatrous “deity Don Juan, the most corrupt hero of the most corrupt work of the impure mind of Byron.” The Greek antiquity, from which Byron drew his inspiration, was summed up in one phrase: “sodomy, rape, incest, and bestiality.” Literature was thus portrayed as an idolatrous worship of sensuality that threatened the Anglo-Saxon world. If nothing was done, then America would become a slave to the Greek Antiquity, a Sodom of the literary world where “priestesses were avowed courtesans, and the worst deeds of the gods were celebrated with all the fascinations of music, poetry, painting, and the drama” (Beecher n.p.). Some educators went so far as to recommend “exclusion of novels, romances and other fictitious creations of the imagination” from school libraries in order to save young readers from the dangers of reading literature (“The New School Act”).<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Of some interests are Tracts No. 493 and 515, which include the following passage: “*Books of mere fiction and fancy* are generally bad in their character and influence. Their authors are commonly bad men, and wicked men do not often write good books . . . Their principles are often corrupt, encouraging notions of chivalry, worldly honor, and pleasure, at war with the only true code of morals. They insult the understanding of the reader, by assuming that the great object of reading is amusement” (Gutjahr 59).

<sup>94</sup> The Trustees of the New York State Public School System entertained the idea of purging libraries of not only “novels, romances and other fictitious creations of the imagination” but also “those catch-penny, but revolting publications which cultivate the taste for the marvellous, the tragic, the horrible, and the supernatural—the lives and exploits of pirates, banditti and desperadoes of every description.” They argued that “[u]nless parents desire that their children should pursue the shortest and surest road to ignominy, shame and destruction—should become the ready and apt imitators on a circumscribed scale, of the pernicious models which they are permitted and encouraged to study—they will frown indignantly on every attempt to place before their immature minds, works, whose invariable

Even such iconic figures as Timothy Dwight, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau jumped on the bandwagon to denounce stylistic peculiarities of foreign writers and artists. Dwight, for his part, bitterly complained about the increasing popularity of “a florid and highly embellished style of composition” that involved “a substitution of ornament for thought, and of sound for sense” (Dwight 50). Transcendentalists, in their effort to make artistic experience more authentic, decried the bad literary influence from abroad as a way to advance their vision of uniquely American art and literature. Emerson, in a frenzy of literary patriotism, claimed that he had little appreciation for what he called “the Venuses and the Cupids of the antique,” the art of the Old World (*Complete Works* 2:366). Those whom he sarcastically called European “umpires of taste” were simply “selfish and sensual” posers who practiced art only “for amusement or for show” (*Complete Works* 3:3). Thoreau took the idea close to heart. “Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!” was the overtly ascetic message of *Walden*, in which he railed against “ornaments of style in literature” and the corrupt meaninglessness of “*belles-lettres* and *beaux-arts*” (39). Europe, with its corrupt aesthetic, had nothing to offer America culturally.

The traveller who visits the Vatican, and passes from chamber to chamber through galleries of statues, vases, sarcophagi, and candelabra, through all forms of beauty, cut in the richest materials, is in danger of forgetting the simplicity of the principles out of which they all sprung, and that they had their origin from thoughts and laws in his own breast. He studies the technical rules on these wonderful remains, but forgets that these works were not always thus constellated; that they are the contributions of many ages and many countries; that each came out of the solitary workshop of

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and only tendency is disastrous, both to the intellect and the heart” (“The New School Act” 40).

one artist, who toiled perhaps in ignorance of the existence of other sculpture, created his work without other model, save life, household life, and the sweet and smart of personal relations, of beating hearts, and meeting eyes, of poverty, and necessity, and hope, and fear. (*Complete Works* 2:359-60)

Apparently neither Thoreau nor Emerson knew how to contemplate America's natural beauty without resorting to cliché-ridden denunciations of bad foreign influence.

As if echoing dreadfully boring moralists of ancient Rome (who were equally disdainful of what they imagined to be the East's corrupting luxury), some American writers often argued that literary sensibility bred sensuality, homosexuality, pedophilia, and other sexual proclivities. It was not long before Americans invented the stereotype of European sensualist, a decadent man whose love of art feeds his sexual proclivities. Novels and newspapers in the early republic frequently mentioned overly sensual Europeans who corrupted American youth. George Thompson, in *City Crimes*, described homosexuals as "genteel foreign vagabonds who infest the city" and patronize "boys who prostitute themselves from motives of gain." The same novel mentions one "Spanish ambassador," a "miserable sodomite," who tried to seduce a young woman who happened to be disguised as a boy (246-7). To the delight of American readers, the pervert was quickly apprehended and thrown off the boat on which the incident took place. The scene was probably meant to be viewed symbolically. Perhaps American readers should also throw all their French and Spanish knickknacks and novels overboard.

Other cases of pedophilia involving foreigners provoked similar reactions. One teacher from Britain, whom I mentioned earlier, was castrated by an angry South Carolina mob after it was discovered that he "seduced and deflowered" several girls in his care. The journalist who was eager to bring the case to the public warned readers to be

vigilant, because it was not an isolated case. To make his point, he mentioned the case of another foreign schoolteacher, who was lynched for the same reason, and some nameless “foreigner” who eloped with someone’s wife and opened a school for young girls. “These are admonitions,” he stated, “sufficient to all parents not lost to a sense of decency, family purity and reputation, never to employ a stranger, much less an immoral profligate, and a hag-beaten debauchee” (“Northampton, December 30”). A similar case, also laced with anti-foreign sentiment, took place in Boston in 1843. It was reported in the *New York Whip* in the following fashion:

The Marshall of Boston . . . must certainly be aware of the doings at a brothel kept by one Susan Bryant. We are told that on the eleventh a boy about fifteen years of age named Richardson, was enticed by one of the bawds into the chamber, and forcibly detained there until Monday morning, when he made his escape. He is a very fair-skinned, light-haired boy, of feminine appearance, and from his story his friends suppose that the woman inveigled him for a singular and unnatural purpose—that of pandering to the morbid appetite of a grey-headed German, who “*keeps*” her. It would be wrong were we to say more of this curious case, as, in the course of the week his parents will have it investigated by the proper authorities. There will be some extraordinary developments—some physiological researches entered into, all of which will be productive of some benefit, and lay before the public a series of transactions never before equaled, we are satisfied. By our next day publication the whole affair will be ripe and fit for the public eye. *Vive la Boston, alias Sodom.* (“Outrage Committed upon a Boy”)

The passage reflects American writers’ conflictedness about such sensational subjects. One cannot help but wonder whether this statement was meant to be read with the tone

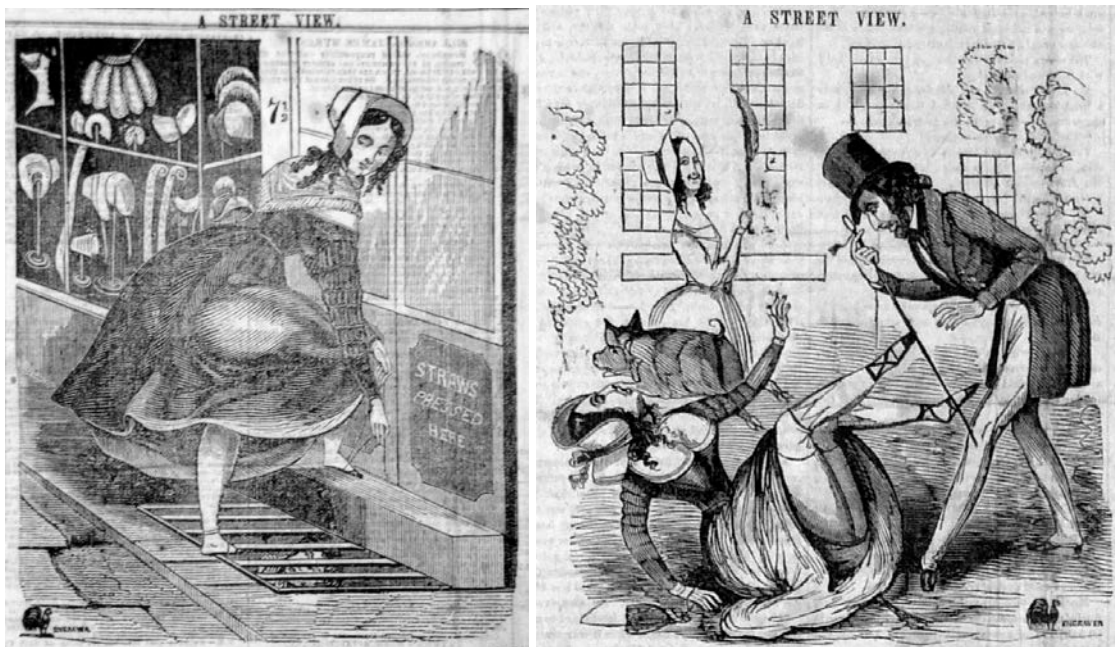
of dismay or joy. Perhaps both. American writers knew well how to hide their prurient interests in tedious moralizing.

#### ANTEBELLUM URBAN CULTURE

American cities in the nineteenth century, which writers and journalists indeed liked to compare to Sodom, offered many voyeuristic pleasures: luxury imports in lavish store fronts, flamboyant dandies, models, garish prostitutes, and enticing advertisements, all begged to be seen. The common denominator of city life is that one gets to see *far more* than one can ever afford. Urban culture is essentially voyeuristic. It was as true in the nineteenth century as it is today.

Sexual liberation which that environment condoned made urban experience even more colorful and at times scandalous. For many young men and women, many of whom flocked to Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, the city afforded a lot of personal freedom and sexual license. To casual observers, it offered plenty of pleasing occasions to enjoy the looks of beautiful women and men (Fig. 7.19 and 7.20). Watching was something even the poor could afford.

Quite expectedly, licentiousness was decried as a manifestation of bad foreign influence. Discussions of prostitution and abortion, for example, bore a mark of American disdain for what was perceived as decadent European sensuality. To prove this point, writers came up with all sorts of arguments. McDowall, for his part, argued that prostitution in American cities was fueled by the influence of European sentimental novels that made young girls too naïve to withstand seducers' charms. Some women were believed to have turned to prostitution because of their love of luxury. Courtesans were typically described as shameless votaries of Venus. Their trade was a foreign cult of sensuality. What was scandalous about them was that they not only brazenly



Figures 7.19 & 7.20: Urban snapshots in antebellum flash press (1842).

promenaded the streets of New York but also wore *exquisite* jewelry and clothes (Fig. 4.13). George Foster described them as

magnificently attired, with their large arms and voluptuous bosoms half naked, and their bright eyes looking invitation at every passer by. Their complexions are pure white and red, and their dresses are of the most expensive material, and an ultra fashionable make. Diamonds and bracelets flash from their bosoms and bare arms, and heavily-wrought Indian shawls, of that gorgeous scarlet whose beamy hue intoxicates the eye, hand carelessly from their superb shoulders, almost trailing on the walk. (*New York by Gas-Light* 6)

Brothels were seen as shrines to European decadence. To create an atmosphere of exoticism, they were typically ornamented with foreign works of sexually enticing nature. George Ellington's *Women of New York* (1869) offered the following image: "On the

walls are pictures of a varied character: there a few 'love scenes,' both choice and fancy; a representation of the god of wine, Bacchus, and one or two Venuses; several engravings of beautiful women . . ." (198). George Thompson agreed, recalling details of his visit to a brothel:

The costly and elegant furniture—the brilliant chandeliers—the magnificent but rather *loose* French prints and paintings—the universal luxury that prevailed—the voluptuous ladies, with their bare shoulders, painted cheeks, and free-and-easy manners—the buxom, bustling landlady, who was dressed up with almost regal splendor and wore a profusion of jewelry. . . (*Life* 323)

Debates about abortion were also framed in terms of American opposition to European decadence. The tools used in what we call family planning were decried as pernicious foreign import that threatened the moral foundations of this country. Thus the sensationalist coverage of Ann Lohman's trials, an immigrant abortionist better known as Madame Restell, provoked a deafening wail of anti-European sentiment. "Madame Restell's Preventive Powders" embodied the falsity of Europe's arts and "have counterfeited the hand-writing of Nature" (*Trial of Madame Restell* 5). Her prosecutor made sure to quote Restell's advertisement that highlighted the culprit's foreignness: "the celebrated and well known Madame Restell [was] for many years female physician in some of the Female Hospitals in Europe," more specifically "in France," the cauldron of perversity in American imagination (7). She was caricatured as a murderer (her name was sometimes tweaked to spell Restall) with an outlandish sense of fashion (Fig. 7.21).

Restell's "arts" threatened the very concept of the family, which for Americans was as sacred as Nature for transcendentalists. Since women were assumed to be inherently promiscuous to resist having affairs, access to abortion services was believed to encourage sexual promiscuity. And so every man who cared about his female

subordinates and the country at large was expected to take this foreign threat seriously. “Father, you have a daughter; she is a human being, and she has human passions, and they may be used and abused . . . . Madame Restell tells your daughter how she may defile her body and debase her minds without fear or hesitation” (6). Sailors, businessmen, soldiers, and men of other preoccupations, whose jobs kept them away from home for extended periods of time, were cited as potential victims of their wives’ access to abortion. To conclude: “We firmly believe it to be the holiest duty in



Figures 7.21: A caricature of “Madame Restall” (1841).

these degenerate times, incumbent upon all respectable family physicians, to rise up in a body and protest against the habit which is insidiously ruining and destroying American Society” (*Madame Restell!* 7).

Sensational crimes against women in cities gave the impression that crime was on the rise. Each of them sparked theatrical outbursts of moralistic journalism. The coverage of the 1836 murder of Helen Jewett, a high-class prostitute, kept many journalists busy for months. The 1838 murder of the teenage starlet known as Miss

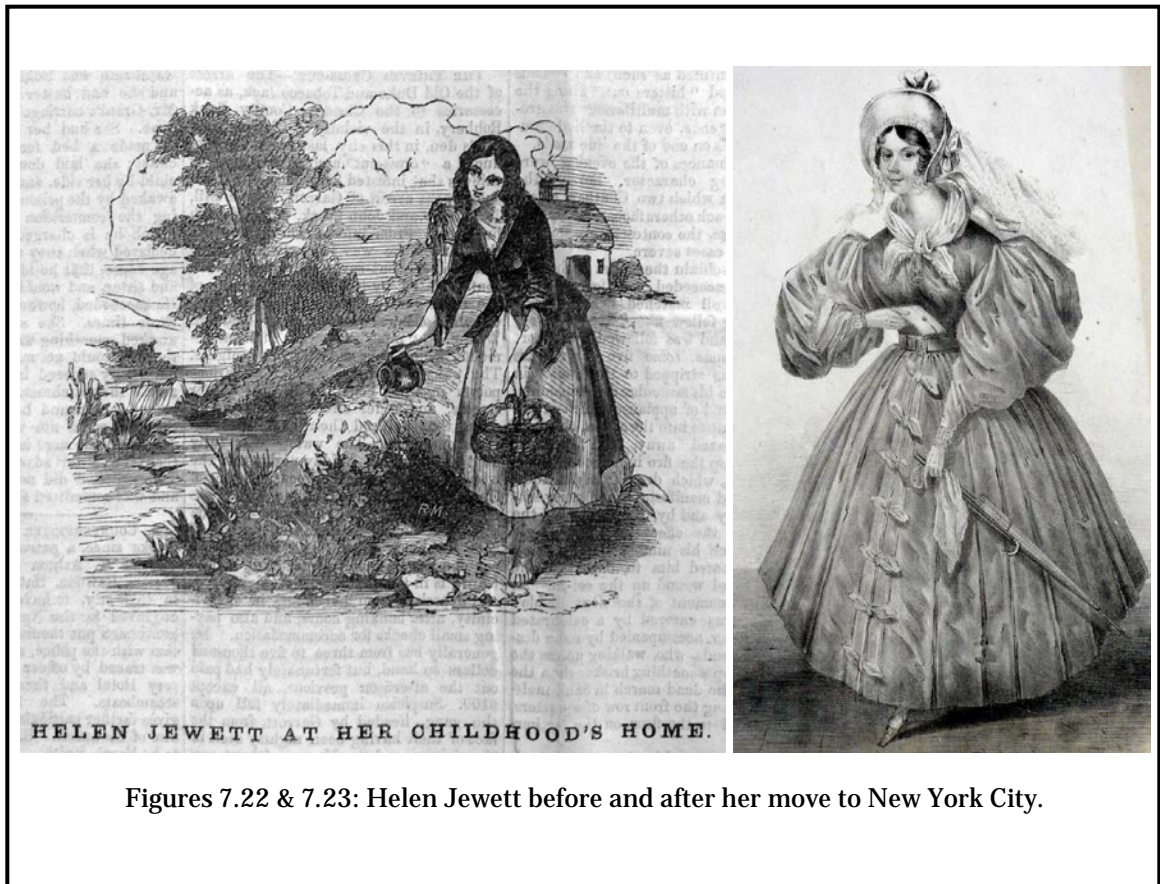
Louisa Missouri created yet another storm of sensationalist reportage.<sup>95</sup> Then, in 1841, the mutilated body of “the beautiful cigar girl” Mary Rogers was pulled out of the river, provoking an even more intensive journalistic frenzy. So did, in 1845, the mysterious death of young Sophia Smith who was found “in an entire state of nudity, lying upon the floor, with some of her spread under her, and dead” (“Mysterious Affair”). Another “beautiful female,” Maria Bickford, was “inhumanly murdered in the moral and religious city of Boston” the same year.<sup>96</sup>

The coverage of such crimes against women exposed tensions among different forms of sensationalism and American animosity toward European culture. Women were often assumed to be victims if their irresponsible lifestyles, which were shaped by their love of European things. Helen Jewett, for example, was noted for her love of fashion. Her room was ornamented with “several theatrical fancy sketches” and “a beautiful portrait of Lord Byron.” Her reading habits were also noteworthy. She liked to read “light novels, poetry and monthly periodicals,” Byron, and Bulwer. She owned a copy of *Lalla-Rookh*, an oriental romance, which she presumably “read and re-read” along with scores of other European novels (“Most Atrocious Murder” 1, *Sketch of the Life of Miss Ellen Jewett* 22). “Her great intellectual passion was for reading the poems of Byron, and particularly Don Juan, which, however, has no doubt, produced more wretchedness in the world, than all the other moral writers of the age can check” (“The Recent Tragedy”). After her murder, which some believed was hastened by her love of luxury and bad reading habits, journalists liked to argue that she was corrupted by the city, which was

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<sup>95</sup> What generated much interest in this case was that the suspicion for the murder fell on the notorious actor Thomas S. Hamblin, who was rumored to have many affairs with young actresses. For details, see the 1838 broadsided filed in the AAS under the title “Attack on Thomas S. Hamblin, Following the Death of Actress Louisa Missouri in 1838.”

<sup>96</sup> See *The Life and Death of Mrs. Maria Bickford a Beautiful Female who was Inhumanly Murdered in the Moral and Religious City of Boston on the Night of the 27th of October, 1845*, by Albert J. Tirrell, her *Paramour, Arrested on Board the Ship Sultana, off New Orleans, December 6<sup>th</sup>* (1846) and James Bickford’s *Authentic Life of Mrs. Mary Ann Bickford* (1846).



Figures 7.22 & 7.23: Helen Jewett before and after her move to New York City.

described as a den of corrupt foreign influence. Her life was summed in simple terms. While she lived in the country, she was a virtuous American country girl. When she moved to a horrible city, she was perverted by its decadence (Figs. 7.22 and 7.23).<sup>97</sup>

The rise of such crimes and the public's obsession with their coverage were actually blamed on the voyeuristic proclivities of city dwellers. Cities afforded criminally-minded and lascivious men plenty of opportunities to enjoy the looks of beautifully women. It was inevitable, as commentators at the time argued, that some women were sexually victimized. Their beauty was seen as a cause of lustful excitement for lascivious men. In American fiction young beautiful women did not fare well at all. Their detailed

<sup>97</sup> For more detailed discussions of the case, see the "Reading and Imagination" chapter in Patricia C. Cohen's *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999) and David Anthony's "The Helen Jewett Panic: Tabloids, Men, and the Sensational Public Sphere in Antebellum New York" (*American Literature* 69.3 [1997]:487-514).

and elaborate descriptions were merely a prelude to sad tales of their seductions, rape, and sometimes even death. For avid readers of American sensationalist novels, the beauty was not so much an object of aesthetic contemplation but a cause of crime. As one of the savvy characters in Buntline's *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* put it, "Beauty is a dangerous possession! . . . It has been the ruin of many a poor girl!" (4:61).

Voyeurism, in this context, had notably negative connotations of lust and lechery. Sensationalist novels of the period were filled with lengthy descriptions of scheming men stalking women in public places. George Thompson described one lascivious character in *Venus of Boston*: "Look at that venerable looking old gentleman, who every Sabbath stands in his pulpit to declaim against wickedness and fleshly lusts. Mark his libidinous eye, as he follows that painted strumpet to her filthy den" (38). Thompson even suggested that it was dangerous for women to appear in public alone. They were supposedly threatened when they walked the streets, or worked in places where strange men could freely look at them. Other popular writers agreed.

One novel that stands out in this respect is Ned Buntline's *Love at First Sight, or, The Daguerreotype* (1848). It is a story of a beautiful poor girl (named Fannie H.), who tries hard to preserve her virtue in the wicked city. It opens with Fanny's visit to an artist's studio, where she has her daguerreotype made. The story takes an unpredictable turn when Fanny realizes that she does not have any money, which, as the reader of sensationalist novels almost instinctively suspects, makes her immediately vulnerable to the artist's advances. Instead of asking his hapless client for a sexual favor, as many readers suspected he would, the kind artist simply asks Fanny to allow him to take her picture as a payment. The strange proposal makes her hesitate, "perchance pondering upon the propriety of permitting her likeness to remain where all the world might gaze upon it; or possibly wondering why the good looking man before her, should wish to have her likeness. . ." (13-4). Her hesitation is understandable. She is a savvy person. As

a savvy city-dweller, she is perfectly aware of the slimy urban world of Boston and the dangers of being an object of someone's admiration. She constantly has to ward off unwanted advances of men. Even her landlady encouraged Fanny to become a prostitute so that she can pay her rent: "As pretty a girl as you wouldn't starve in Boston, when rich young men are as plenty as blackberries. . ." (29). Luckily for her, right at the moment of complete despair she is rescued by the rich and noble young man who has been looking for her ever since he noticed her picture in the artist's studio.

The novel juggles many recognizable tropes: a rich man's longing for a poor wife, a young city girl's hopes and fears, and the dangers of being exposed to the gaze of others. At the center of it all, however, was a simple question that bothered everyone at the time. Was the habit of watching someone beautiful a sign of licentiousness? This question applied not only to the lascivious characters of sensationalist novels but also to readers. Did they appreciate beautiful women in popular novels with aesthetic or sexual delight? It was not easy to tell. The way Buntline describes the protagonist's reaction to the picture of beautiful Fanny sends mixed signals: "You may laugh at me, and call it a boyish freak to love at first sight, but I *love* this girl, yes I *love*" (18). Love her how? Does he want her sexually? One can imagine Buntline's readers' surprise when it turned out that the young man actually had noble intentions. What the readers knew, however, was that in the mean world imagined by the sensationalist writers, the world which many readers apparently confused with reality, the optimism of the *Love at the First Sight* was an obvious exception, perhaps even an irritating joke.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> We should not confuse this national obsession with violated women with the Romantic tradition of aestheticizing death. Romantic poets, who turned dead women into poems, adhered to the Orpheic concept of art. According to it, intense grief over the death of a beloved woman could awaken a poet's artistic genius and inspire him to compose enchanting and lyrical tributes to the woman he lost. This idea is summed at its best in Poe's notorious dictum that "the death of a beautiful woman . . . is unquestionably the most poetic topic in the world." American sensationalist writers, however, operated on a quite different principle. Their interest in crime against women was ritualistic: they turned women's deaths into discussions of some larger serious issues. Consequently, American sensationalists made sure

## AMERICAN EROTICA AND PORNOGRAPHY

Antebellum America saw a dramatic proliferation of erotica and pornography, which did not go unnoticed by the authorities. In 1842 Congress banned importation of materials which were considered obscene, but the act did nothing to quell Americans' love of the titillating. The law actually had a reverse effect in that it helped American writers to reclaim the market traditionally dominated by European imports. What the American writers had to be mindful of, of course, were the peculiarities of their culture.

Antebellum sex literature had many shapes (pseudo-medical pornography, erotic novel, dirty crime reports, etc.), but, for the reasons discussed earlier in this chapter, it typically exhibited two characteristics. American writers strove to replicate many European conventions and even designed their works to give the impression that they were imported from Europe. At the same time, out of the consideration for the didactic tradition, they always maintained that their works had legitimate goals, such as promotion of hygiene and prevention of crime. This approach was, more often than not, just a ploy to sell books. A sense of Europeanness gave their works the air of enticing exoticism that undermined the writers' didactic claims.

One common strategy, which American publishers adopted from their European counterparts, was to market pornography as medical literature. This explains the popularity of books about female anatomy and hygiene, with such notable example as

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to dispel any sense of literariness (or whatever was assumed by that word) and actually took steps to avoid making a connection between death and lyricism. Their works were meant to provoke pity and manipulate the audience's emotions in many ways, but death was not, in the majority of popular works, a lyrical event. In this respect, their stance was deliberately anti-Romantic. It is not surprising that American popular novels of the period often portrayed Romantic poets as freaks, losers, or simple drug-addicts with pretentiously lofty ideas. Ingraham's *Miseries of New York* includes a sadly entertaining scene in which a deranged Romantic poet, clearly lacking any common sense, was teaching destitute people how to enjoy the enlightening state of starvation. As he proclaimed in his madness: "Sirloins and stakes! I scorn such gross ideas! / I, a poet, to suffer for want of chewing? / Out ignoble idea!" (33).



Figures 7.24: An Illustration from *The Secret Habits of the Female Sex* (1860).

Jean Dubois' *The Secret Habits of the Female Sex; Letters Addressed to a Mother of the Evils of Solitude, and Its Seductive Temptations to Young Girls* (1860). The "evils of solitude" was a fancy term for masturbation. Like other works of this sort, *The Secret Habits of the Female*

*Sex* was meant to warn readers about the dangers of masturbation and save young girls "from dishonor, disease and death" it was believed to cause (4). The author hoped (or so he said) that reading about masturbating girls could help mothers preserve "the morals of their daughters." It is doubtful, however, many mothers read the book, for it was clearly designed for men who loved titillating literature. *The Secret Habits of the Female Sex* consisted of, among other things, doctors' reports and confessions of young women about their solitary habits. What is more, the book was lavishly illustrated with sensual images of nude women (sometime depicting two women together in amorous embraces), which left no doubt that the writer's claim of improving readers' morals was simply a joke (Fig. 7.24). The titles advertised on the back cover of the book give us an even better idea of the kind of reader it was intended for. They were all racy novels: *The Six Mistresses of Pleasure*; *The Handsome Cherubino*; *Memoirs of the Devil*; and *The Pretty Milkmaid of Monfermeil*. The latter did not survive, but we can imagine it was not about the simple pleasures of rural life.

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Figures 7.25: "Medical, Instructive, and Entertaining Books" (1858).

The popular weeklies often advertised such pseudo-medical works as *The Sexual Monitor, and Secret Guide*; *The Wedding Night, or, Advice to Timid Bridegroom*; *Woman Unveiled*; and *The Marriage Bed, or, Wedding Secrets Revealed by the Touch of Hymen* alongside erotic novels. "This is a most remarkable book," one advertiser said

of *The Marriage Guide*, “giving facts and lucid information which is to be found in no other work. It contains a great many engravings, as well as colored plates” (Fig. 7.25). *Advice to Husbands and Wives* offered “valuable information” to insure “happiness and domestic peace.” “No married Couple should be without it.”<sup>99</sup>

Although few antebellum erotic and pornographic novels survived, Donna Dennis demonstrated by researching contemporary court records that some American writers were so fearless that their books often landed them in courts for obscenity.<sup>100</sup> The novels were openly promoted in the flash press and, occasionally, in promotional fliers. The one titled “Venus’ Library, Or Tales of Illicit Love” (ca. 1850), for example, lists several novels of this sort: *Confessions of a Washington Belle*; *The Beautiful Creole of Havana*; *The Libertine Enchantress, or the Adventures of Lucinda Hartley*; *Child of Passion, or the Amorous Foundling*, and *The Adventures of Anna P—, or the Belle of New York*. The flier gleefully mentioned that even “more and original works of the same class” were on the way. The fact that some booksellers were prosecuted for selling what the authorities described as obscene books suggests that some of them were quite sexually explicit.

The majority of popular American writers, however, turned to the subject of sex with both interest and hesitation—at least that was the impression they wanted to give. American sex pulp fiction relied on a precarious strategy of balancing their readers’ voyeuristic inclinations and the didactic conventions of American sensationalism. The most famous representative of this trend is George Thompson, who achieved much fame and notoriety in antebellum America as a journalist (he was associated with such racy

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<sup>99</sup> The titles appeared in the fliers circulated by the Boston publishers D.H. Wellington in 1858: “Emporium of Rare and Interesting Literature” and “Catalogue of Medical, Instructive, and Entertaining Books.” For other sources, see John S. Haller’s and Robin M. Haller’s *Physician and Sexuality in Early America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1974) and Roy Porter’s and Lesley A. Hall’s *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>100</sup> See the “Fancy Books and Racy Pamphlets” chapter in Donna Dennis’s *Licentious Gotham*.

weeklies as *Venus' Miscellany* and *The Broadway Belle*) and a novelist. By some estimates, he wrote over one hundred pop novels. They cover almost the entire spectrum of nineteenth-century sensationalism: erotica, seduction tales, criminal adventures, urban horror, and other provocative genres. The following summary of one of his novels, *The Bridal Chamber, and its Mysteries; or, Life at Our Fashionable Hotels*, gives us a good idea about the scope of his fiction:

[I]t combines the charm of Romance with all the somber realities of Truth. The magnificent Palaces on Broadway, are set forth in all their brilliant array. The sensual married lady of wealth and the licentious parson; the Philadelphia millionaire and his unwilling bride, the latter of whom is carried off the bridal chamber by a fashionable adventurer; the South Carolina planter's terrible revenge on the seducer of his wife; these, and numerous other thrilling matters, constitute the foundation of the story, which is handsomely printed on fine paper, and beautifully illustrated with appropriate engravings. (*Broadway Belle*, Jan 8 1855, 4)

When Thompson wrote about sex in particular, he was interested in its most scandalous aspects: cross-dressing, sadism, voyeurism, and pedophilia, which his readers apparently appreciated and his detractors despised. The latter were particularly appalled by Thompson's line of defense. He usually claimed that he wrote about sexual proclivities and crimes to promote traditional American values and to warn his fellow Americans about the dangers that their culture faced, particularly what he considered the wicked influence of European literature and art.

Considering Americans' ambivalent attitude toward European culture (or whatever constituted European culture in American imagination), Thompson's strategy was similar to that of many other American writers. He consistently exploited in his fiction the themes which his compatriots ordinarily associated with European culture:

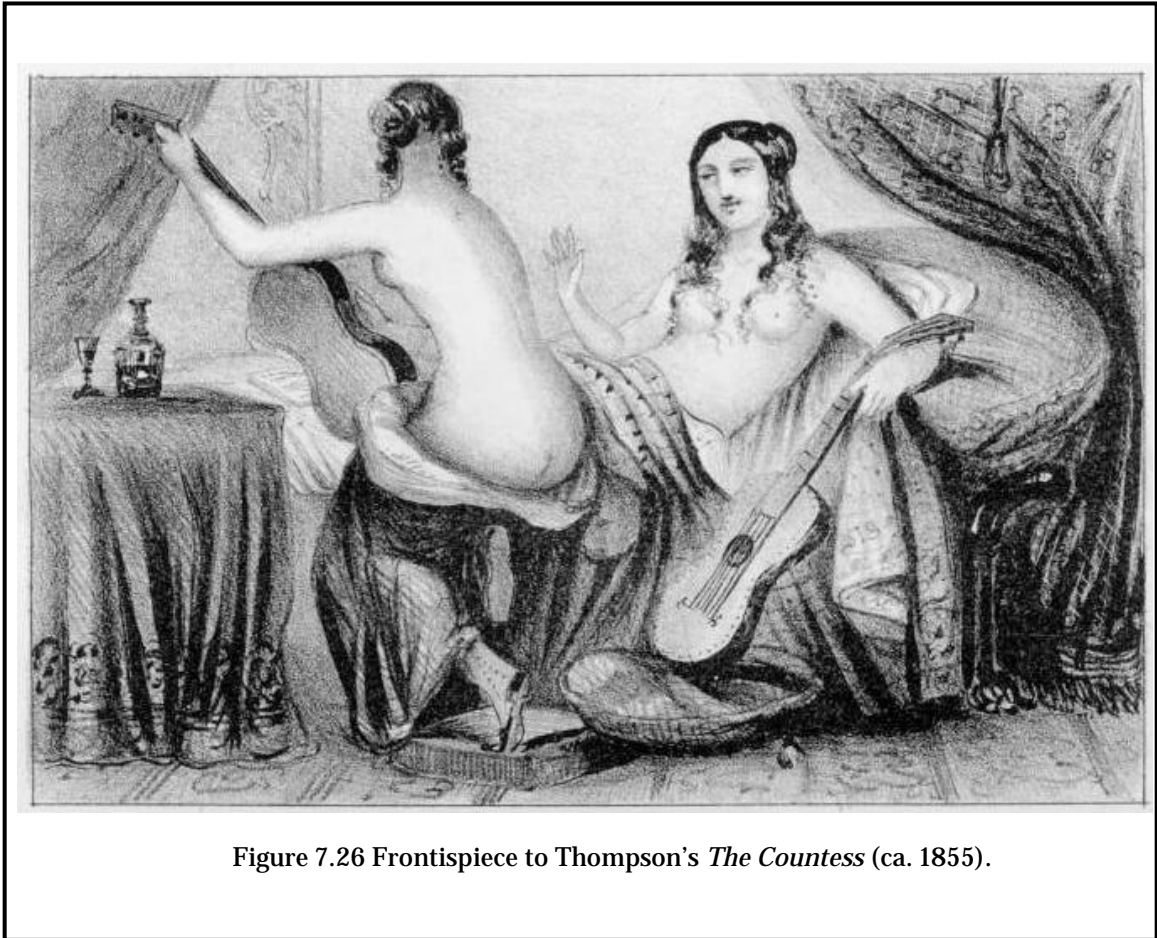


Figure 7.26 Frontispiece to Thompson's *The Countess* (ca. 1855).

aristocratic opulence, decadence, and eroticism. But Thompson also allowed his readers to hide their voyeuristic appreciation of such titillating subjects under the guise of pseudo-patriotic moralizing about the corrupting influence of European culture. In fact, he established himself as a fervent American patriot who believed that it was his burden to expose the crimes committed by various “foreign vagabonds” (*City Crimes* 246). As a result, his fiction is characterized by a weird juxtaposing of cultural patriotism and the sex tropes borrowed from the works of his European counterparts.

He was not particularly patriotic in his choice of pennames. In his day he was better known as “Eugene de Orsay,” “Appollonius of Gotham,” and “Greenhorn.” At times, he did not even mind to be confused with Charles Paul de Kock. Thompson's *New-York Life*, for example, was marketed as a book by the notorious Frenchman.

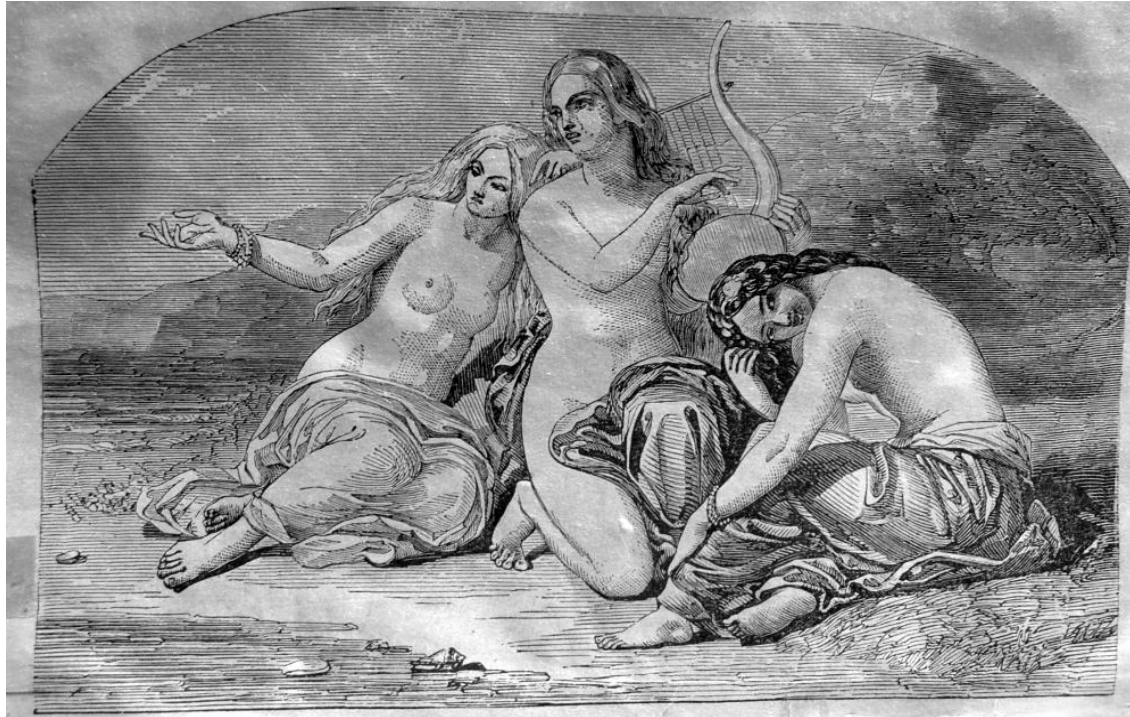


Figure 7.26: Frontispiece to Thompson's *The Ladies' Garter* (ca. 1855).

In the tradition of European erotica, Thompson's novels featured plenty of enticing images, essentially serving as invitations to enjoy Thompson's voyeuristic tales. The cover of *New-York Life* beckoned readers with a pleasing image of a reclining semi-nude woman. The cover of *G'Hals of Boston*, a collection of short biographies of famous prostitutes, was dominated by the image of bare-breasted dancer. Thompson also made sure to have his novel about Lola Montez, which was serialized in *Venus' Miscellany* under the title *The Adventures of Lola Montez*, ornamented with snapshots of the protagonist's amorous exploits. In some cases, such as *The Ladies' Garter* and *The Countess, or, the Memoirs of Women of Leisure*, the images were clearly meant to evoke the Old World decadence. They depict women and men in sensuous poses holding musical instruments or dancing (Figs. 7.26 and 7.27).

Particularly symbolic is the frontispiece to *Venus in Boston* in that it perfectly captures Thompson's strategy of exploiting his readers' penchant for voyeurism (Fig. 7.28). It shows two lovers whose dalliances are being observed by a maid and a lapdog, as well as the novel's readers who are invariably implicated in the act of voyeurism. The same can be said about the novel as a whole. It reads like a sequence of titillating scenes and stunning crimes. Almost from the start, Thompson invites us to overlook his occasional moralizing and simply enjoy characters' "devious wanderings" and amorous adventures (*Venus in Boston* 104).

He outdid himself in *The Loves of Cleopatra; or, Mark Anthony and his Concubines*, one of his most extravagant antebellum novels of voyeuristic pleasures. It stuns readers with unbelievable images of Egyptian opulence and sexual extravagance:

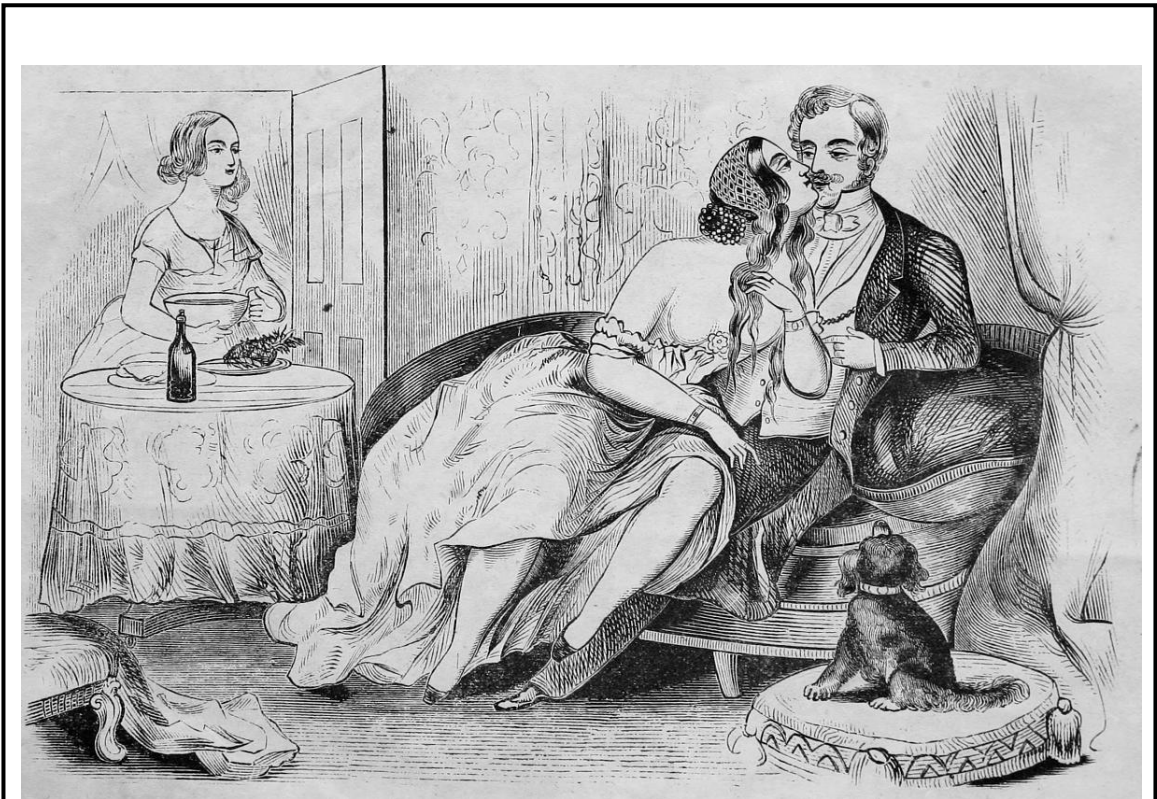


Figure 7.28: Frontispiece to Thompson's *Venus in Boston* (1850).

the lavishness of imperial palaces, the sexually-stimulating art that adorns their walls, and the orgies that take place in their halls. Thompson used the foreign setting to indulge in all sorts of transgressive topics: pedophilia, lesbianism, homosexuality, and group sex. The very first scene in the novel introduces a naked thirteen-year old girl who is offered for sale. Soon the reader comes across the scenes about girls as young as eight who are bought by old decadent men to perform in bizarre sex rituals.

An excerpt from Thompson's novel *The Magic Night Cap: A Story for Husbands and Wives* exemplifies the voyeuristic streak in his fiction.<sup>101</sup> It follows the urban adventures of a young man who has the power to be invisible at will. He uses it to visit the most forbidden places: people's bedrooms, bohemian orgies, girl's dormitories, and other alluring locations. One of the most provocative scenes takes place in the so-called "Palace of Voluptuous Delights," a secret denizen "dedicated to pleasure" in which perverse New York worthies indulge their sexual proclivities. In one episode, which has many voyeuristic overtones, Thompson describes a group of men observing naked children perform a lascivious show:

[T]he fat parson, who seemed to be the grand master of ceremonies, rang a silver bell, whereupon there issued from a door . . . a troop of rosy children, both boys and girls, of ages ranging from ten and fourteen. These children had been carefully selected with special reference to their youthful beauty, and they had been trained to the base employment for which they were designed. They were all innocent of drapery of any kind, and carried silver goblets filled with spiced wines, which they handed around to the guests, singing, meanwhile, in melodious voices, a Bacchanalian song . . . Having distributed the wines until the guests were

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<sup>101</sup> Only some parts of the novel survived in the extant issues of *The Broadway Belle*, the weekly which Thompson edited (January 8, 22, 29, and March 12 1855).

all satisfied, these children, each one of whom represented a Cupid and a Psyche, began to dance in the most graceful and winning manner, charming the eye with their rapid and exact evolutions, and heating the passions of the beholders by their personal symmetry and loveliness . . . . When the children had concluded their dancing, they were kissed and caressed by the company as a reward for their cleverness; and then, having withdrawn to their own apartment, these young disciples of inequity amused themselves by an unrestricted indulgence in every species of lasciviousness with which they had become acquainted during their apprenticeship to that abominable trade. (*The Broadway Belle*, Jan 29 1855, 1)

The passage leaves little doubt that Thompson was drawn to salacious details. His description of the dance is fairly detailed. He dwells on sensual details, particularly the children's loveliness, which were meant to have an arousing effect on the audience. It is also noteworthy that the children are dressed as mythological characters—a touch of European decadence. One can easily assume that Thompson wanted his readers to share his own voyeuristic and lascivious fascination with the spectacle. But then, to deflect an accusation of licentiousness, he interrupts this description with a harsh denunciation of aristocratic decadence:

What punishment could be too severe for the man or the woman who would wantonly instil [sic] into the mind of a child a knowledge of the ways of vice! And yet such sacrilege is daily perpetrated. We shrink from the task of describing the lewd enormities committed by the children who were employed as cup-bearers to the visitors who frequented the *Palace of Voluptuous Delights*. (*The Broadway Belle*, Jan 29 1855, 1)

Such an awkward contrast between moralistic and voyeuristic elements is characteristic of Thompson's brand of erotica. He was, all at once, a purveyor of sensual pleasures and an ardent patriotic moralist who denounced the corrupt sensuality of European culture. He drew enticing images of sensual delights—only to denounce them soon after.

What is amusing is that Thompson and many other contemporary writers considered it their patriotic duty to write erotica. They believed that it was their task to expose the sexual depravity of American aristocrats, who were believed to have betrayed their country by embracing European decadence. One Wall Street speculator, whom Thompson calls "The Fancy Man of the Aristocracy," is described as "[a] fine and tasteful connoisseur of painting and sculpture" (*New-York Life* 18). He travels throughout the world to buy girls for his harem in New York.

George Foster mimicked Thompson's mixture of fascination with and disdain for American aristocracy as he wrote about decadent balls which American aristocrats and criminals (who were all the same to Foster) liked to throw. Like Thompson, Foster went out of his way to point out that many New Yorkers unpatriotically paraded their love of European culture. One of such "Cyprianic balls," as he called their gatherings, "would have done honor to the most aristocratic libertine circles of Paris, London, and Vienna" (*New York by Gas-Light* 99, 97). It was given in

the residence of one of the most dashing and distinguished courtezans in the metropolis—the Aspasia of the nineteenth century—who, abandoning herself openly and avowedly to the two pursuits of pleasure and power, has brilliantly fulfilled every aspiration which the heart of an ambitious woman without principle can entertain. (96-7)

The ball gathered "nearly every courtesan in town" (98) as well as scores of "sporting-men, bloods, [and] fast men" (97). The women's aristocratic aspirations reflected their

unpatriotic Europhilia. The organizer was referred to as the “Empress.” Her guests called themselves “Marchioness D’Orsay,” “Mary Queen of Scots,” “Princess Jenny,” and “Lady Anna Morris” (97-8).

Thompson’s account of “obscene exhibitions of Model Artists” in New York offers yet another example of his ambiguous attitude toward European culture. He was clearly fascinated with *tableaux vivants* as a popular European import but always approached them under the guise of a stern American moralist. He called them “the orgies of the rich and the fashionable” and insisted that Americans’ fascination with this phenomenon betrayed the downfall of republican values. He also emphasized the sexual nature of such exhibitions. “Never was seen so beautiful and voluptuous a scene,” he wrote about one of the several *tableaux* he visited.

It seemed as if every fold of drapery, of which there was not an inch too much, had been arranged with diabolical art, to excite poor human nature. Every limb, every outline, every beauty, was revealed in its most exciting aspects; still there was nothing that could be called indecent. Yet I saw eyes that shot forth lurid fires, and heard here and there deep respirations, such as mark the prevalence of certain emotions. (*New-York Life* 51)

Could one really tell whether Thompson was serious in his disdain for such voyeuristic shows? I doubt this question really mattered to the majority of Thompson’s readers.

It is ultimately hard to say whether antebellum American writers who turned to the subject of sex were serious about their noble intentions. Did they sincerely believe in what they claimed was their mission to uphold American values? Were indifferent to those values? Did they want to subvert them? Some of these writers, such as McDowall, Lippard, and Ingraham, seemed to be dead serious about what they wrote. They even adopted overly realistic style of writing to prove it. Others, particularly Thompson and

Buntline, assumed an amusingly disingenuous stance. They adopted the unadorned Puritan style for ostensibly moralistic purposes, which made them sound like old-fashioned American traditionalists—but they did it merely to conceal their voyeuristic sensationalist sensibility under the guise seriousness. In this respect, the works of Thompson and some of his contemporaries exhibit an admirable sense of complexity by allowing us to read them any way we want.

In the case of Thompson, scholars' disagreement reminds us about the amazing ambiguity of Thompson's fiction with respect to his attitude toward the influence of European culture in the United States. Some scholars, most notably Christopher Looby, concluded that Thompson actually reinforced dominant American values instead of undermining them.<sup>102</sup> David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman, on the contrary, take a note not only of Thompson's "American idealism" but also his "entertaining irreverence" to emphasize the subversive character of his novels (xiii). As they write, Thompson questioned many American values, including "domesticity and Christian nurture, the cult of true womanhood, institutional power structures such as the church and big business; white supremacy, the commonsensical view of the human mind as rational and guided by ethics, and the notion that literature must teach a clear moral lesson" (xxx).

The ambiguity of Thompson's fiction—and the ambiguity of antebellum American erotica at large—can be better understood if we take a note of his style. He did not subvert anything directly. In fact he can be said to belong to the neo-Puritan tradition didacticism. He intentionally adopted the style of early American writers who mercilessly

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<sup>102</sup> See Christopher Looby's "George Thompson's 'Romance of the Real': Transgression and Taboo in American Sensation Fiction" (*American Literature* 65. 4 [1993]: 651-672). While analyzing Thompson's novel *House Breaker*, Looby concludes that Thompson "wants to affirm sentimental domestic norms even as he violates them" (653). Robin Gray Nicks, in "Fairy Tales and Necrophilia: A New Cultural Context for Antebellum American Sensationalism" (Ph.D., University of Florida, 2006), not only agrees with Looby's conclusion but takes this point even further: "Thompson's . . . works do not actually subvert dominant ideologies of antebellum America; they only pretend to do so" (133).

exposed various social ills for legitimate purposes. But it is also undeniable that he subverted that didactic tradition by exploiting its techniques in a morally ambiguous form. This was how Thompson and his contemporaries defied the didactic conventions of their predecessors and helped develop American literature in new directions.

## CHAPTER VIII

### POE AND THE AMERICAN TRADITION OF SENSATIONALISM

“The print which merely falls in with ordinary opinion (however well founded this opinion may be) earns for itself no credit with the mob. The mass of the people regard as profound only him who suggests pungent contradictions of the general idea. In ratiocination, not less than in literature, it is the epigram which is the most immediately and the most universally appreciated.”

Edgar Allan Poe  
“The Mystery of Marie Roget,” 1842

**Précis:** The major writers of what became known as the American Renaissance did not escape the influence of the sensationalist tradition. It can even be argued that their literary innovations at least in part reflected their desire to explore some apparent contradictions of the sensationalist rhetoric that pervaded many forms of writing in the nineteenth century. The works of Edgar Allan Poe are particularly revealing in this respect. As I argue in this chapter, Poe was both drawn to the contemporary culture of sensationalism and notably critical of its tradition and influence. This made him one of the most perceptive cultural commentators and literary innovators of his day.

## POE AND CONTRADICTIONS OF AMERICAN SENSATIONALISM

The immense popularity of sensationalist literature in the nineteenth century made a substantial impact on not only popular writers but also the authors whose works eventually formed what is considered the first distinctly American literary canon. As David S. Reynolds persuasively argued in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, such great writers as Melville, Poe, Whitman, and Hawthorne were very well aware of the popular trends and even consistently adopted sensationalist themes in their works. Whatever we assume by the “literariness” of these writers’ works, Reynolds wrote, it “resulted not from a *rejection* of a socioliterary context but rather from a full *assimilation* and *transformation* of key images and devices from this context” (7). The major writers, in other words, were not “alienated rebels” who remained proudly indifferent to the sensationalist culture of their day. They worked from within “a heterogeneous culture which had strong elements of the criminal, the erotic, and the demonic” (169).

I will take this point even further. The transformation of the American literary culture in the middle of the nineteenth century was at least in part precipitated by the ideological contradictions and stylistic tensions in the rhetorical tradition that grew to rely on sensationalist techniques. What propelled that literary transformation was that more and more writers, including those who would become considered the chief representatives of the nineteenth-century literature, felt compelled to cater to their readers’ obsession with the scandalous while at the same time exploring tensions in the American tradition of sensationalism. This chapter focuses on the works of Edgar Allan Poe, who in my view was more successful than other contemporary writers in his efforts to examine the literary impact and contradictions of that tradition.

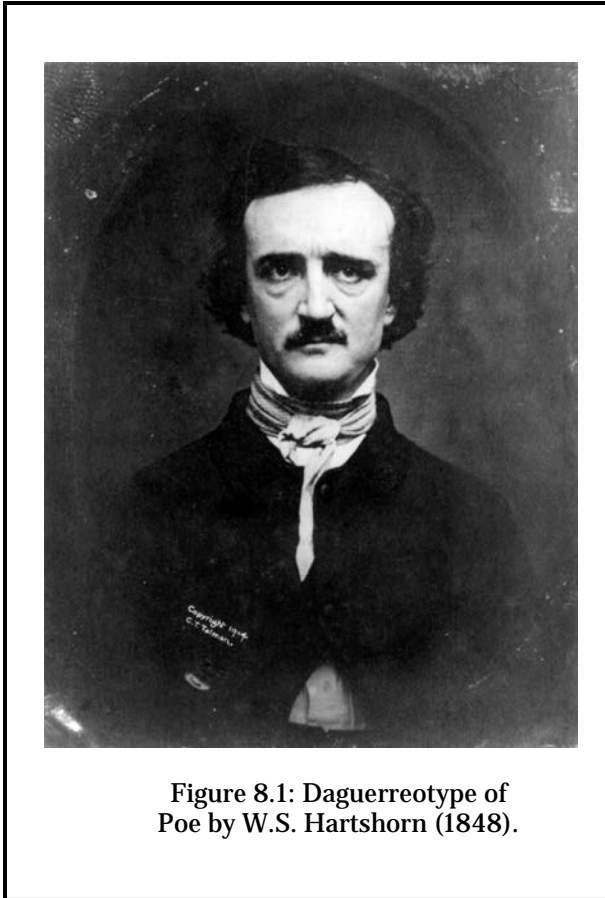


Figure 8.1: Daguerreotype of Poe by W.S. Hartshorn (1848).

The choice of Poe in this context might seem odd. It is true that many of his works reflect his fascination with the provocative and rely on some themes which were popularized by his American predecessors. At the same time he does not fit well in the early American literary canon. His books do not really belong on the same bookshelf with the works of such quintessentially American writers as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, who were more reliant on the literary strategies of their ancestors than was Poe. Perry Miller

and Sacvan Bercovitch had good reasons to culminate their studies of early American culture precisely with discussions of Emerson and Thoreau. Poe's legacy as an American writer, meanwhile, has been strangely precarious. Does he even belong in the American literary canon? After all, he hardly ever wrote about America. He was notably indifferent to many religious and political issues that formed the backbone of American literature. His literary and aesthetic views, particularly his scorn for didacticism, earned him much respect in Europe while putting him in conflict with many American writers of the day. Poe's well-known daguerreotype, which was made shortly after his suicide attempt in 1848, captured his image of a brooding cultural outcast (Fig. 8.1). As one of his early biographers described the writer, Poe was an "exotic, un-American and semi-insane" writer (C. Alphonso Smith n.p.). At best, he was someone who just happened to write in

English and live in the United States.<sup>103</sup>

Poe's "un-American" image is, of course, deceptive. As we will see in this chapter, he was acutely aware of the issues that defined the American culture, the country's literary tradition, and even the tensions among different currents of American sensationalism. This is what made him one of the most perceptive cultural commentators of his day.

His literary, critical, and journalistic works highlight several crucial issues in the American tradition of sensationalism. Most importantly, Poe challenged the legitimacy of the common practice of using sensationalist techniques for didactic purposes. He also drew attention to the voyeuristic aspect of some forms of sensationalist literature. Although he is often remembered as an admirer of gothic literature, which indulges readers' voyeuristic fascination with horror, Poe actually belonged to the ranks of the American writers who were critical of the European (gothic) influence. Finally, Poe's works self-consciously expose their reliance on various sensationalist techniques as a way to highlight their abuse in popular American fiction and journalism. By borrowing and overdramatizing recognizable sensationalist topics in his stories, which he often marketed as factual reports, he reminded his readers that popular sensationalist publications relied on formulaic rhetorical conventions.

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Poe's attitude toward sensationalism was, of course, not so clear-cut. What is so

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<sup>103</sup> J. Gerald Kennedy explains Poe's "un-American" image: "Excluded from the so-called American Renaissance and from most nationalist critical paradigms from F. O. Matthiessen to Sacvan Bercovitch, Poe has occupied an anomalous position on both the old and new canons of antebellum American writing. Evincing little sustained interest in the frontier, the natural landscape, the Puritan past, the settlement of the colonies, the Revolution, or democracy itself, he seems in many ways the most un-American of our early writers. Many of his narratives (and poems) depict not native scenes but the fantastic, half-remembered landscape of the England he had seen in his childhood. Perhaps not coincidentally, Poe has won greater acclaim in Europe, where readers and critics have either detached his work from its historical contexts or assimilated it into Continental intellectual traditions" (Kennedy xiii).

captivating about his works is that they simultaneously exploit and satirize the sensationalist excess and contradictions of popular antebellum journalism and fiction. Several of his stories, in which he parodied cheap press, betray his disdain for its conventions and suggest that Poe actually wanted to distance himself from his contemporaries who indulged in the scandalous. "How to Write a Blackwood Article" (1838), for example, consists of a series of comical suggestions which the editor of the famous *Blackwood* magazine (Dr. Money Penny) gives to an aspiring writer (the Signora Psyche Zenobia) who wants to write a best-seller. What he simply tells her to do is to get into "such a scrape as no one ever got into before" and record her experiences. She can, he tells her in all seriousness, bake herself in an oven, fall out of a balloon, perish in an earthquake, or simply get struck in a chimney. "Should you ever be drowned or hung," he adds, "be sure and make a note of your sensations—they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet" (341). To encourage Zenobia, Money Penny refers to his recent publications of this sort:

There was 'The Dead Alive,' a capital thing!—the record of a gentleman's sensations when entombed before the breath was out of his body—full of taste, terror, sentiment, metaphysics, and erudition. You would have sworn that the writer had been born and brought up in a coffin. Then we had the 'Confessions of an Opium-eater'—fine, very fine!—glorious imagination—deep philosophy—acute speculation—plenty of fire and fury, and a good spicing of the decidedly unintelligible . . . . Then there was 'The Involuntary Experimentalist,' all about a gentleman who got baked in an oven, and came out alive and well, although certainly done to a turn. And then there was 'The Diary of a Late Physician,' where the merit lay in good rant, and indifferent Greek—both of them taking things with the public.

And then there was 'The Man in the Bell' . . . . It is the history of a young person who goes to sleep under the clapper of a church bell, and is awakened by its tolling for a funeral. The sound drives him mad, and, accordingly, pulling out his tablets, he gives a record of his sensations. Sensations are the great things after all. (340-1)

Money Penny's lesson pays off. Zenobia, a diligent student, eagerly follows his suggestions and embarks on her own little journey which she records in the story titled "A Predicament" (1838). Its ending is a comical masterpiece: Zenobia's head gets stuck in a tower clock and she is slowly decapitated while watching a giant rat devour her adorable lap dog.

Money Penny's suggestions and Zenobia's story might seem overly comical, of course, but we should not forget that American papers routinely published ostensibly serious accounts of people who claimed to have perished in all kinds of accidents, buried alive, or sedated by strange drugs. Poe's contemporaries knew well that Money Penny's advice to his young protégé was not particularly unusual by the journalistic standards of the day. Some contemporary examples, which barely reflect the immense popularity of this odd journalistic subgenre, include "Comparative Sensations of the Dying" (*Boston Courier*, August 21, 1837), "The Last Sensations of Being Blown up in a Steamboat" (*The North American and Daily Advertiser*, July 16, 1842), "Sensations in Trance" (*Boston Courier*, April 27, 1843), "Sensations in Drowning" (*Daily Evening Bulletin*, September 24, 1857), "My Own Funeral" (*Harper Monthly*, January 1858), and "Sensations of Taking Chloroform" (*Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, March 22, 1861). What is captivating about such articles is the striking contrast between their effort to sound realistic and the fanciful character of their descriptions. "Sensations in Trance," for example, recalls the case in which a woman was assumed to be dead and almost buried alive. "My Own

Funeral,” a similar story, includes a lengthy passage of the main character’s “sensations in death.” The author of “Sensations in Drowning,” for his part, recollected his near-death experiences of being drowned to the point of “insensibility” and defended the veracity of his article by reminding the readers that it relied entirely on his “experience.” Another article offers its author’s recollection of his “indescribable” and “peculiar” sensations of being blown up in a steamboat. Such articles—much like Poe’s stories, in fact—often blur the lines between the real and imaginary. Money Penny was perfectly right: “Nothing so well assists the fancy, as an experimental knowledge of the matter in hand” (341).

Poe’s “Loss of Breath” (1832), another satire of contemporary sensationalism, is narrated by a dead man who offers a nearly inconsequential but amusing account of his death (touting the fact that he writes from “experience”). The narrative is full of sensationalist clichés which are pushed to the point of absurdity. Within just a few pages, the dead narrator recalls his experiences of being severely beaten up, having his face eaten by cats, being dissected by a body-snatcher, executed, and buried in a mass grave where he happens to get into a fight with some old rival of his. The plotline makes little sense but neither do typical sensationalist articles that inspired the story. Poe actually turned its protagonist into the very embodiment of American sensationalism: he is pretentiously serious, nonsensical, laughable, but undeniably spectacular. His flamboyant self-sacrifice for the sake of the audience’s delight is, symbolically, the fate of any sensationalist text which, in spite of its entertaining and redeeming qualities, is torn apart by its contradistinctions and absurdity. The execution scene, which the protagonist approaches as if it were a performance made for the benefit of his audience, is invested with many symbolic overtones:

I did my best to give the crowd the worth of their trouble. My convulsions

were said to be extraordinary. My spasms it would have been difficult to beat. The populace *encored*. Several gentlemen swooned; and a multitude of ladies were carried home in hysterics. Pinxit availed himself of the opportunity to retouch, from a sketch taken upon the spot, his admirable painting of the 'Marsyas flayed alive.' (400)

This performance can be said to symbolize the rascality and hyperbolism of sensationalist literature that shocks and entertains. The story as a whole can be read as a subtle commentary on various aspects of contemporary sensationalism, particularly the theatrical and voyeuristic dimensions of execution accounts, their celebratory tone, and their dubious sense of purpose. Ultimately, what Poe's satires of cheap press demonstrate is that by the nineteenth century the tradition of sensationalism reached the point when its conventions could hardly be taken seriously.

While reading these satires, however, we should not miss their self-critical character. Those who are familiar with Poe's other stories, which deal with many provocative themes, might actually be puzzled about the writer's attitude toward sensationalism and cheap press. After all, Poe sought wide recognition just like many other writers—and, to that effect, he toyed with sensationalist topics. He wanted, as he explained on several occasions, to move away from what he called "ponderous" literature and write stories which were "readily circulated" and accessible.<sup>104</sup> Poe's most famous

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<sup>104</sup> Poe explained what he meant by "readily circulated" literature in his letter to John P. Kennedy, in which he asked for financial assistance to create a new literary magazine: "I need not call to your attention to the signs of the times in respect to Magazine Literature. You will admit the tendency of the age in this direction. The brief, the terse, and the readily circulated will take the place of the diffuse, the ponderous, and the inaccessible . . . I do not mean merely for the taste of the tasteless, the uneducated, but for that also the few. The finest minds of Europe are beginning to deal with Magazines. In this country, unhappily, we have no journal of the class, which can afford to compensate the highest talent, or which is in all respects a fitting vehicle for its thoughts" (MS 23 UVA). A nearly identical passage was included in Poe's letters to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (June 21, 1841) and Fitz-Greene Halleck (June 24, 1841).

stories were clearly inspired by sensationalist news. In fact, he can be said to have implemented many of those seemingly ridiculous suggestions which Money Penny mentions in "How to Write a Blackwood Article," including having his narrators write confessions while hallucinating on opium, having them buried alive, or getting them into other situations which "no one ever got into before." Poe was also a master of what by then had become the most recognizable subgenres of American sensationalism: criminal confession, criminal biography, and scientific sensationalism. He was actually so fond of using various sensationalist techniques, borrowing themes from scandalous works, and even imitating their style that his works may even appear to be little different from those of sensationalist writers whom he parodied. What was remarkable about Poe, in other words, was that he had a habit of standing very close to those whom he satirized.

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), Poe's longest work and a sensationalist tour-de-force, is telling example of his fascination with popular sensationalism. The novel exploits almost every single provocative theme which we can find in antebellum popular literature: adventure, piracy, excessive alcoholism, graphic violence, cannibalism, tales from the tomb, exoticism, scientific wonders, and scores of others. The novel's full title, following the model of sensationalist fiction, reads as follows: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, of Nantucket. Comprising the Details of a Mutiny and Atrocious Butchery on Board the American Brig Grampus, on her Way to the South Seas, in the Month of June, 1827. With an Account of the Recapture of the Vessel by the Survivors; Their Shipwreck and Subsequent Horrific Sufferings from Famine; Their Deliverance by Means of the British Schooner Jane Guy; the Brief Cruise of this Latter Vessel in the Antarctic Ocean; her Capture, and the Massacre of her Crew among a Group of Islands in the Eighty-Fourth Parallel of Southern Latitude; Together with the Incredible Adventures and Discoveries still farther South to which that*

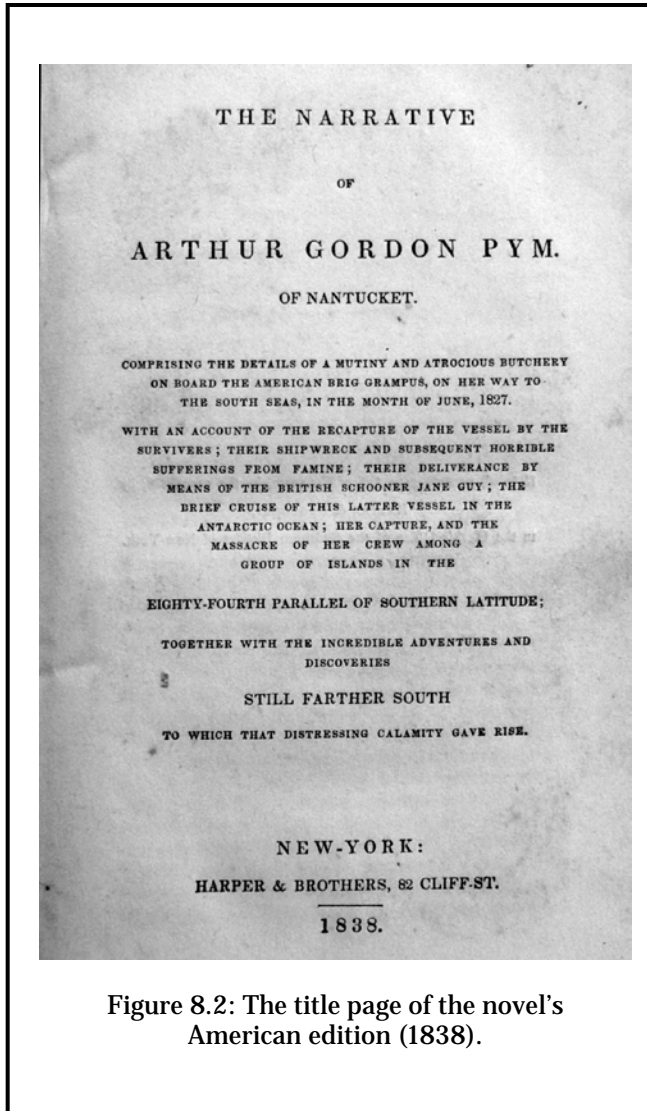


Figure 8.2: The title page of the novel's American edition (1838).

*Distressing Calamity Gave Rise.*

The novel's plot is as disjointed as its title. It follows a sequence of unrelated but captivatingly shocking events. The protagonist, a teenager with an alcohol problem and a craving for adventure, runs away from his parents in Nantucket to become a sailor. He secretly boards a whaler bound for the Southern Seas. After staying in his hiding spot for days, which he compares to being buried alive, Arthur discovers that there was a mutiny and much of the crew is slaughtered. He sides with a small group of sailors who hide from the

mutineers. Arthur then devises the plan to take control of the ship; he dresses up in a dead sailor's clothes and pretends to be a ghost to scare the mutineers. Another bloodbath ensues, after which all mutineers are killed and thrown overboard. But there is no time to rejoice. A hurricane batters the vessel for days, nearly sinking it. Without food and water the survivors grow desperate. When they come across another ship, they rejoice—only to be disappointed when they discover that it is covered with disfigured corpses of men who died from some infectious disease. As Arthur and his companions continue drifting in the open ocean, hunger forces them to resort cannibalism. Their

comrade's flesh keeps the remaining three men alive for some time longer, till another storm washes the remaining food away, another man dies, and the ship capsizes. Arthur and his last companion barely survive by holding on to their capsized ship, with sharks circling them, till they get miraculously saved by another vessel. The story does not end here but turns into a wildly imaginative exploration narrative. *Jane Guy*, the ship that rescued Arthur and his companion, sails toward the South Pole. It comes across a magnificent island populated with savages who trick and nearly slaughter the explorers. Just when the reader starts to think that this novel does not have an ending, it abruptly ends with Arthur's recollection of their efforts to survive in the labyrinthine landscape of the island. In merely two hundred pages Poe created a wildly exciting sensational odyssey that went over every provocative theme known to his contemporaries. What dispelled any doubts about the author's sensationalist proclivities was that Poe crowned this unbelievable adventure with a sincere affirmation of its authenticity, a standard in contemporary sensationalist literature.

Poe's contemporaries were quick to note the overly sensationalist character of his novel. An 1838 article in *The New York Review* commented that even though the novel is "written with considerable talent" and "is not destitute of interest for imagination," it is "painful" to read because "there are too many atrocities" and "too many strange horrors."<sup>105</sup> In the words of Rufus W. Griswold, Poe's first biographer, the novel is "as

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<sup>105</sup> The entire review, which was printed in *The New York Review*, read as follows: "NOTWITHSTANDING this circumstantial and veracious looking length of title, the work is all a fiction. It is written with considerable talent, and an attempt is made, by simplicity of style, minuteness of nautical descriptions, and circumstantiality of narration, to throw over it that air of reality which constitutes the charm of *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Sir Edward Seaward's Narrative*. This work has, however, none of the agreeable interest of the two just named. It is not destitute of interest for the imagination, but the interest is painful; there are too many atrocities, too many strange horrors, and finally, there is no conclusion to it; it breaks off suddenly in a mysterious way, which is not only destitute of all *vraisemblance*, but is purely perplexing and vexatious. We cannot, therefore, but consider the author unfortunate in his plan" (489).

full of wonders as Munchausen, has as many atrocities as the Book of Pirates, and as liberal an array of paining and revolting horrors as ever was invented by Ann Radcliffe or George Wilkes.” Although *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is often considered a miserable literary failure and was Poe’s only attempt to write a sensationalist novel, he never lost interest in the sensational. It is evident in his other works that eventually brought him much recognition.

He is particularly well remembered for his imitation of criminal confessions with such famous stories as “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), “The Imp of the Perverse” (1845), and “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846). As we saw earlier, the genre emerged in the Puritan New England, where ministers routinely published doomed criminals’ “dying speeches,” and became even more popular in the nineteenth century, when trendy writers sensationalized such confessions with amazing skill. One of their innovations, which Poe also exploited in his fiction, was to transform the familiar figure of the *repentant* criminal into that of the *unrepentant* villain who acknowledges his sins but refuses to express any regret. The arch-villains in such popular urban gothic novels as Lippard’s *Quaker City* (Devil-Bug) and Thompson’s *City Crimes* (The Dead Man), for example, love to brag about their crimes while shocking the reader with their unrepentant attitude. Other popular writers created equally horrifying characters notable for their sadistic proclivities and unapologetic insolence.

Poe pushed this trend even further, which eventually earned him both fame and notoriety. The murderers in his stories are horrifying because they not only commit vicious crimes and refuse to repent but also make brilliant efforts to justify their actions. The psychopathic narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” who introduces himself as someone who “heard all things in the heaven” as well as “many things in hell,” takes pleasure in confessing to the murder of an old man whom he buried under the planks of his own

house. He even demands that the reader appreciate the ingenuity of the crime and “how calmly I can tell you the whole story” (303). The vengeful narrator of “The Cask of Amontillado” also appears to be unmoved as he recalls luring a man into a wine-cellar where he cold-bloodedly entombed him. He even ends his confession with an infuriatingly inappropriate exclamation “*in pace requiescat!*” (279).

“The Imp of the Perverse” introduces an even more horrific character, who stands in direct contrast to the image of criminals in early American didactic literature. The story’s narrator not only remains emotionally unmoved by the crime which he commits but even devises an elaborate philosophical argument to prove his lack of guilt. He murders a man simply to expose the fallacy of the popular philosophical theory according to which all actions invariably aim at some good. He shows that his did not. Not only does he kill a man, which obviously does not do anyone any good, but he also confesses the crime in complete disregard for the basic principles of self-preservation, thus demonstrating that one’s actions are generally motivated by one’s propensity for perversity. In some respects, the man’s confession exemplifies the Puritan concept of criminality as an innate and incorrigible sense of perversity that leads man to his downfall. The description of his public confession, which culminates the story, contains many religious references. He speaks about the “nightmare of the soul,” “pangs of suffocation,” and the “passionate hurry.” He recalls how the “long-imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul,” and he “fell prostrate in a swoon.” Unlike the authors of typical confessions in that period, however, this one remains completely indifferent to the idea of salvation. In fact, he ends his narrative, which he pens in prison while awaiting his execution, by bravely reconciling himself with the uncertainty of his future and even rejoicing at the prospect of spiritual liberation: “To-day I wear these chains, and am *here!* To-morrow I shall be fetterless!—*but where?*” (284).

The ambiguity of the question with which the story ends was meaningful on several levels. For the narrator of this story, the vague “where?” of his destiny affirms his courage as he faces the unknown. For Poe, however, this question had wider connotations. It applied not only to the protagonist of the story but the entire genre which, by his day, became “fetterless” and liberated from the didactic conventions of the past. The question was, of course, where these developments would eventually lead.

#### SCIENCE AND SENSATIONALISM IN POE’S FICTION

Poe’s experimentation with scientific and medical sensationalism inspired a few well-known stories. He was always genuinely interested in science, but what is important to remember is that he was particularly drawn to controversial scientific theories, including animal magnetism, phrenology, and spiritualism.

The pseudo-science of animal magnetism, which kept Poe’s attention throughout his writing career and inspired such stories as “Mesmeric Revelation” (1844), “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains” (1844), and “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845), was a controversial theory right from its inception. Popularized by the German-born doctor Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) in the 1770s, it quickly spread throughout Europe and North America. The theory relies on the notion that human well-being is determined by the equilibrium of what Mesmer called the universal magnetic fluid in the body, or animal magnetism.<sup>106</sup> Any disequilibrium of that fluid, as he suggested, is what actually causes many illnesses which can be cured by manipulating it. With a bravado of a

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<sup>106</sup> Mesmer introduced the term “animal gravity” in his dissertation, *De planetarum influxu in corpus humanum* (1766), and later modified it to “animal magnetism” in his pivotal work *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal* (1774): “La propriété du corps animal qui rend susceptible de l'influence des corps célestes et de l'action réciproque de ceux qui l'environnent, manifestée par son analogie avec l'aimant, m'a déterminé à la nommer *Magnétisme Animal*” (qtd. in Podmore 51-2).

charlatan, Mesmer actually suggested that his method can help cure virtually all physical and psychological illnesses. A particularly well-known application of that theory, which was advanced by Mesmer's disciples, is the pseudo-psychological practice of "mesmerism," or putting a patient into what is called a "mesmeric sleep" during which his mind can be examined with probing questions.

It is understandable that Mesmer's work was surrounded by so much controversy. Crowds of people, encouraged by the copious reports of miraculous cures, rushed to seek treatment from mesmerists. Skeptics, meanwhile, waged a campaign against Mesmer and his followers, whose ideas were decried as a new form of charlatanism. Conflicting reports about animal magnetism were quite common in press at the time. Advertisements of mesmeric treatments started to appear in American newspapers in the 1780s. Like those in Europe, they promised cures for "all nervous and chronic disorders," including the conditions "vitiating by the venereal virus" and "gout, rheumatism, hysteric and hypocondriac vapours, fever, deafness and blindness" ("Cures by Magnetism"). Papers eagerly published cheerful letters from the grateful patients who claimed that they owed their good health to Mesmer and his treatment. Such favorable reports were countered with a large number of angry articles about the "witchcraft of *Animal Magnetism*" and accusations of quackery, thus fueling the scientific controversy that followed animal magnetism from Europe to America. The debate about the scientific worth of mesmerism was even joined by such heavyweights as Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and the Marquis de Lafayette, whose conflicting views did not help settle the matter. When the second wave of Mesmer's disciples arrived in the United States in the 1830s, the controversy was set ablaze once again.

DR. SWAN, PHYSICIAN.      MRS. SWAN, EXAMINING A PATIENT.

**DR. SWAN & LADY**  
 THE WELL KNOWN  
**MESMERIC & BOTANIC PHYSICIANS,**  
 OF LOWELL,

Would respectfully announce to the citizens, of CLINTONVILLE, and vicinity, that they have taken Rooms at

**THE CLINTON HOTEL,**

Where they will remain until Saturday, August 3d. They will be happy to wait upon all those who may favor them with a call. DR. SWAN, would say to those whom he may examine, that while his Lady is in the MESMERIC SLEEP, she will

**Look into the System and tell the precise Location, State and Character of any Disease, (either Personally or by a Lock of Hair,) and prescribe for the same, to the entire satisfaction of all.**

☞ Mrs. SWAN is undoubtedly the only independent Clairvoyant in New England, who can be depended upon in the examination of diseases. Thousands are ready to testify to this fact. Her remedies are purely vegetable, and are founded upon the strictest laws of Pathology, Physiology, and Natural Science.

☞ To those who wish, she will give a correct account of ABSENT FRIENDS, DESCRIBE PLACES AND PERSONS; WHETHER IN PROSPERITY OF ADVERSITY, SICKNESS OR HEALTH; LAW, LOST PROPERTY, OR MARRIAGE, and will give advice respecting any kind of business, whether good to engage in, or not.

Figure 8.3: An advertisement for mesmeric cures (1850).

The intense sensationalist coverage which was sparked by the growing interest in mesmerism in this country lasted roughly from 1835 to 1850, the period that covers the span of Poe's writing career. The fad led to the appearance of a large number of

contentious publications. Mesmer's numerous detractors in United States decried mesmerism as a sham and even a threat to democracy. David Meredith Reese's *Humbugs of New-York, Being a Remonstrance against Popular Delusion* (1838) threw the science of animal magnetism into the same basket with phrenology, homeopathy, and other quackery. *Yale Literary Magazine* (1838) did not stop at calling mesmerism "a delusion" but also described it as a threat of "perfect anarchy" to the "whole system of civil society." The article went on to state that if the spread of mesmerism was not checked, then "[t]he worst horrors of the French revolution would be witnessed among us, when a man under the influence of this infatuation, should see or think that he saw, in every fellow man a witness of his most secret acts, an intruder into his most sacred employments" ("Animal Magnetism" 65-6).

Colorful seduction stories about women who were violated by mesmerists added some anxiety about that the spread of the pseudo-science. Newspapers eagerly printed and reprinted amusing reports about mesmerists seducing hapless young ladies and duping the naïve (similar to the tales about revivalists in the 1740s). One article, "The Triumphs of Animal Magnetism: An Anecdote" (*The Massachusetts Centinel*, April 27, 1785), tells a story of a young Englishwoman ("remarkable for her invariable prudence") who was subjected to a mesmeric "licentious experiment" after which she was so distraught that she chose to retire to a convent. *Lisa; or, the Mesmerist's Victim* (ca. 1850), a popular novel by Clara Cavendish, told as a story of a "gentle spirited girl" who fell into the snares of "heartless libertines." Playwrights amused their audiences with such productions as *Animal Magnetism: A Farce*, *Animal Magnetism; Or, No Magnet Like Love* and *Animal Magnetism: Or, The Stratagem of Love*, which ran throughout the country for decades.

What is immediately noticeable about the works of Mesmer's disciples,

particularly those of Charles Poyen, who rekindled Americans' interest in mesmerism in the 1830s, is their nervous defensiveness. Some proponents of mesmerism assumed the tone of Christ's apostles: firm in their beliefs and contentious in their choice of words. Their works typically began with introductions that had all the characteristics of sensationalist literature. The writers insisted that they felt compelled to write in order to dispel malicious "rumors" about mesmerism, offer "well authenticated facts," and rescue the subject from the accusations of "quackery and impudent deceit" (Poyen v, Townshend 2).<sup>107</sup>

The controversy about this pseudo-science caught attention of several well-known writers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Friedrich von Schelling, Coleridge, Emerson, and Margaret Fuller, as well as Poe. Some of them saw animal magnetism as a serious science, while others considered it as simply sham.<sup>108</sup> What made Poe different

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<sup>107</sup> An exemplary passage can be found in the introduction of Poyen's *Progress of Animal Magnetism in New England* (1837): "In the present state of Animal Magnetism in this country [the United States], a collection of well authenticated facts, coming from numerous and respectable sources, seems to me imperatively demanded; both to instruct those who are not yet informed of the phenomenon, and establish the truth of the science in the mind of the public generally. Such are the character and purpose of the following series of narratives; I doubt not that they will meet the wants and expectations of all, except those whose judgment is totally wrapped by prejudice, or subverted by intentional stubbornness and self-conceit . . . . I have no regard for those who despise or neglect the exercise of such means of conviction; they show themselves unworthy of the rank of the moral and intellectual beings. I care not for their opinion—let them think and say what they please" (Poyen v, vi).

<sup>108</sup> Studies examining the impact of mesmerism on American intellectuals include Bruce Mills's *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transitional States in the American Renaissance* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006); Deborah Manson's "'The Trance of the Ecstatica': Margaret Fuller, Animal Magnetism, and the Transcendent Female Body" (*Literature and Medicine* 25.2 [2006]: 298-324); Samuel Chase's *Mesmerism and Hawthorne: Mediums of American Romance* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998); and Taylor Stoehr's *Hawthorne's Mad Scientists: Pseudoscience and Social Science in Nineteenth-Century Life and Letters* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978). Some detailed studies of the relation between Romanticism and mesmerism include Maria Tatar's *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), which examines the impact of Mesmer's theories on such writers as Hoffman, Balzac, Poe, and Dickens; Eric G. Wilson's "Mater and Spirit in the Age of Animal Magnetism" (*Philosophy and Literature* 30.2 [2006]: 329-345), in which he traces Coleridge's fascination with animal magnetism; Frederick Burwick's "Coleridge, Schlegel, and Animal Magnetism,"

from many of his contemporaries was that he was interested in animal magnetism not only as a science but also as a controversy.

His most famous tribute to the subject of animal magnetism is “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845). The story was published as an account of a mesmeric séance. Such reports were quite common in newspapers, but Poe outstripped his rivals with gusto. The story’s narrator, a mesmerist named P—, claimed that he used his skill to delay his patient’s death for several months by preserving him in the state between life and death. As it often happens in his stories, in other words, Poe pushed a popular theme to the level of utter absurdity and controversy.

He clearly designed the story as a journalistic provocation. It was written in the style of other reports of mesmeric séances and published without any explanation of its fictional character. Understandably, when the story appeared in press, some readers assumed that it was true, which caused a sensation. As one reader recalled, Poe’s “straightforward style, so utterly devoid of all appearance of art, carried with it almost universal conviction that the writer was telling the truth simply for the truth’s sake” (Griswold, *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe* 436). Elizabeth Barrett Browning also read the story and complained about Poe’s habit of “making horrible improbabilities seem so near and familiar.” As she recalled, the story was “going the round of newspapers” while “throwing us all into ‘the most admirable disorder,’ and dreadful doubts as to whether ‘it can be true,’ as the children say of ghost stories” (Browning 859). Poe indeed wanted to trick his readers; he prefaced one of the reprints of the story with a statement in which he implicitly affirmed its veracity by refusing to clarify its origin: “An article of ours . . . has given rise to some discussion—especially in regard to the truth or

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in *English and German Romanticism: Cross-currents and Controversies*, ed. James Pipkin (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1985); and Nigel Leask’s “Shelley’s Magnetic Ladies’: Romantic Mesmerism and the Politics of the Body,” in *Beyond Romanticism: New Approaches to Texts and Contexts* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

falsity of the statements made. It does not become us, of course, to offer one word on the point at issue . . . . We leave it to speak for itself" (*Broadway Journal*, 20 December 1845).

The opening paragraph of the story follows the stylistic conventions of typical mesmeric reports. It acknowledges the controversy surrounding this "extraordinary case" that "excited discussion." It ridicules other "garbled or exaggerated" accounts that "became the source of many unpleasant misrepresentations." Finally it promises the reader the "facts" which are meant put the controversy to rest:

Of course I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion. It would have been a miracle had it not- especially under the circumstances. Through the desire of all parties concerned, to keep the affair from the public, at least for the present, or until we had farther opportunities for investigation— through our endeavors to effect this—a garbled or exaggerated account made its way into society, and became the source of many unpleasant misrepresentations, and, very naturally, of a great deal of disbelief.

It is now rendered necessary that I give the *facts*—as far as I comprehend them myself. (96)

It was not the first time when Poe tricked his readers by adopting the style of controversial scientific reports. A year earlier, before "Valdemar" caused such a sensation, Poe published another story on the same subject, "Mesmeric Revelation" (1844). Its introduction, just like that of "Valdemar," was styled in the fashion of usual mesmeric accounts. Echoing the rhetorical strategy of Mesmer's followers, the narrator commenced by declaring that "the *rationale* of mesmerism" and "its startling *facts* are

now almost universally admitted” except by some “unprofitable and disreputable tribe” of doubters. He added that it was probably “absolute waste of time” to try to argue about mesmerism and then proceeded with his captivating report (88).

“Mesmeric Revelation” was written as an account of a séance in which a dying man was put in mesmeric sleep. What made the story even more provocative was that this time Poe used it as an occasion to speculate about such fascinating and controversial subjects as God, the immortality of the soul, and the mysteries of the universe. He even went so far as to suggest that the fascinating revelations in this story were made while his patient was already dead and speaking from “the regions of the shadows” (95).

It is doubtful that Poe wanted his readers to take mesmerism seriously. The story merely afforded him an opportunity to comment on the absurdity of contemporary mesmeric reports. “Mesmeric Revelation” was, all at once, an exploitation of an immensely popular subject as well as an elaborate critique of its sensationalist nature—the same approach we can notice in his treatments of other sensationalist topics.

#### POE’S AESTHETICS OF SENSATIONALISM

Poe’s aesthetics requires some clarification, because more often than not he is mistaken for a rigid aesthete. We are often led to believe that Poe’s stories should be read in relation to dominant aesthetic models, not popular culture. We are reminded, for example, of his dictum that art should have nothing to do with social issues, which arguably reflects his disdain for didactic and reform literature. We can also discern in Poe’s stories many signs of his fascination with the Romantic notion that a perfect work of art should be treated as an object of disinterested contemplation, which clearly put him at odds with many socially-conscious writers of his day. There are some obvious

connections between his love of horror and the Romantic concept of sublime—the strategy of exciting “the ideas of pain and danger . . . in a manner analogous to terror” for artistic purposes (Burke 13). His talent for transforming characters’ suffering into elaborate and mesmerizing tales, which he summed up in his notorious dictum that a beautiful woman’s death is “the most poetic topic in the world,” suggests his devotion to the Orpheic art model.<sup>109</sup> His readers have indeed many reasons to read Poe’s stories as artistic experiments that hardly reflected the cultural environment.

Such explanations of Poe’s aesthetics are somewhat limited, if not misleading. They do not account for Poe’s fascination with the popular culture of his day, particularly his interest in the scandalous. As I will argue here, Poe was not a rigid aesthete whose views relied entirely on specific aesthetic formulas. He positioned himself right in the midst of the conflicts among different groups of writers and artists who promoted different theories about art and its social role. Consequently, his literary approach was notably affected by the aesthetic tensions in the antebellum America.

We have to acknowledge, of course, that some statements Poe made do give the impression that he was at odds with the sensationalist culture of his day. He claimed, for example, that writers should avoid any vulgar subject: “let nothing vulgar be *ever* said or conceived” (575). He attacked what he called “the heresy of *The Didactic*” and maintained that literature should have no social purpose (892).<sup>110</sup> At times he even went

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<sup>109</sup> The model is exemplified in Ovid’s version of the myth of Orpheus. Its protagonist is inspired by his wife’s death to compose exceptionally moving poems and songs.

<sup>110</sup> A particularly telling passage can be found in “The Poetic Principle” (1848): “It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. We Americans especially have patronized this happy idea, and we Bostonians very especially have developed it in full. We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem’s sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force: — but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls, we should

so far as to claim that writers should not be concerned with factual realism and truth, which obviously put him in conflict with many popular writers whose works, as we saw earlier, purported to offer nothing other than unvarnished truth and “facts without fiction.” Poe also seemed to be completely indifferent to the social issues that preoccupied sensationalist writers of his day (slavery, women’s rights, economic injustice), which reflects his belief that aesthetic pursuit of Beauty should have nothing to do with the subjects of justice or morality.

“The Poetic Principle” explains Poe’s aesthetic views in the following terms. The mind is divided into three parts, “the Pure Intellect, Taste, and the Moral Sense.” Their functions are distinct: “Just as the intellect concerns itself with Truth, so Taste informs us of the Beautiful, while the Moral Sense is regardful of Duty” (893). What is important in this theory is that Beauty is essentially separated from Truth and Morality: “Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever with Duty or with Truth” (894). In other words, an artist’s social concerns should not interfere with his purely aesthetic pursuits. In this respect, Poe seemed to be indebted to the aesthetic theories promoted by Romantic poets and theorists who maintained that art was meant to be an object of contemplation for the benefit of the soul. Poe even went so far as to state that “[i]n the contemplation of Beauty we alone find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement, *of the soul*, which we recognize as the Poetic Sentiment” (895). These statements cannot be easily reconciled with the beliefs embraced by popular sensationalist writers. While Poe claimed to be fascinated only with the high-minded concepts of Truth and Beauty, popular writers generally kept their eyes in the gutter.<sup>111</sup>

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immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified—more supremely noble, than this very poem—this poem *per se*—this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake” (892-3).

Poe's work as a reviewer reflected his aesthetic views. In his reviews he paid much more attention to the stylistic intricacies of a given work than generally expected. *How* a work was written was more important for Poe than *what* was in the work. Robert D. Jacobs, in his study of Poe's reviews, made an important distinction: "[i]f a Burton or an Emerson could argue that what was good had to be beautiful, Edgar Poe could counter the argument that what was beautiful had to be good and that beautiful art had an indirect effect upon behavior simply because it was beautiful" (26). While some of Poe's contemporaries emphasized the importance of "morals and manners," which was the domain of popular didactic writers, Poe "drew upon the critical tradition of an older country in his concentration upon matters of taste" (18). It was understandable that more often than not Poe was reluctant to compliment openly sensationalist works. David S. Reynolds was right to point out that "[t]he recoil away from unregulated manifestations of the Subversive imagination is a common thread running through much of Poe's literary criticism" (*Beneath the American Renaissance* 228).

We have to be careful, of course, not to be misled by the apparent rigidity of Poe's aestheticism. At times, we should not even take Poe's statements seriously at all. His aesthetics was far more flexible and vibrant than he let his readers believe. Many of his works clearly indicate that Poe experimented with different aesthetic forms while rejecting the artistic formulas which he prescribed in his essays. In short, he did not see art in strictly Romantic terms. He did not always see a work of art (or literature) as a mere object of contemplation (the idea which even Romantic writers and poets hardly ever followed). Instead, Poe often experimented with different aesthetic models, including various forms of sensationalism, which gave his works the sense of complexity

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<sup>111</sup> For more detailed analyses of Poe's aesthetics in relation to morality, see Joseph J. Moldenhauer's "Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe's Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision" (*PMLA* 83.2 [1968]: 284-97) and Gerald M. Sweeney's "Beauty and Truth: Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelstrom'" (*Poe's Studies* 6.1 [1973]: 22-5).

that shattered his image of a devout aesthete.

The suggestive eroticism of some of his stories is the case on point. On the surface, the lyricism of such stories as “Morella” (1835), “Ligeia” (1838), and “Eleonora” (1841) betray Poe’s Romantic mindset. Their main characters are enigmatic women whose exceptional beauty mesmerizes the male narrators who write about them. Ligeia’s beauty is “above or apart from the earth.” Her eyes are like “divine orbs” (655-6). She is immortal. She embodies the very essence of the sublime that plunges the narrator in the state of anxiety every time he tries to recall and describe her features. Heroines of some of his other works, particularly Morella and Eleonora, are described in similar terms.<sup>112</sup>

If we do not get distracted by such Romantic clichés, however, we can find numerous sexual, perverse, and sacrilegious details, which raise some questions about Poe’s aesthetic views. “Ligeia” at first appears to be completely devoid of sexually references—but then we come across a suggestively sexual poem with a phallic reference to something called “the conqueror Worm” (659). Zenobia’s narrative, for its part, overflows with playful sexual references. “Eleanor,” which dazzles with its lyricism, is laced with fanciful references to some unmentionable parts of male and female anatomy:

The margin of the river, and of the many dazzling rivulets that glided through devious ways into its channel, as well as the spaces that extended from the margins away down into the depths of the streams until they reached the bed of pebbles at the bottom,—these spots, not less than the

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<sup>112</sup> The tendency to read Poe in such neo-Romantic terms is fairly common. It is well exemplified in Karen Weekes’ essay “Poe’s Feminine Ideal,” in which she argues that Poe’s female characters are nothing more than idealized projections of the narrators’ artistic talents. “The woman must die in order to enlarge the experience of the narrator, her viewer . . . His fictional ‘ideal’ is a woman who can be subsumed into another’s ego and who has no need to tell her own tale . . . . I join other critics in arguing that Poe never truly wrote about women at all, writing instead about a female object and ignoring dimensions of character that add depth or believability to these repeated stereotypes of the beautiful damsel” (148, 150).

whole surface of the valley, from the river to the mountains that girdled it in, were carpeted all by a soft green grass, thick, short, perfectly even, and vanilla-perfumed, but so besprinkled throughout with the yellow buttercup, the white daisy, the purple violet, and the ruby-red asphodel, that its exceeding beauty spoke to our hearts in loud tones, of the love and of the glory of God.

The story also includes references to some “fantastic trees” with their “tall slender stems” pointing “into the centre of the valley”:

And, here and there, in groves about this grass, like wildernesses of dreams, sprang up fantastic trees, whose tall slender stems stood not upright, but slanted gracefully toward the light that peered at noon-day into the centre of the valley. Their bark was speckled with the vivid alternate splendor of ebony and silver, and was smoother than all save the cheeks of Eleonora; so that, but for the brilliant green of the huge leaves that spread from their summits in long, tremulous lines, dallying with the Zephyrs, one might have fancied them giant serpents of Syria doing homage to their Sovereign the Sun. (650)

What is provocative about this passage is how irreverently Poe mixed innocent references to nature and praises of God with sexually suggestive details. To appreciate the complexity of his stories, we should look through the apparent but misleading notion that he wrote about women as merely idealized and asexual objects.

The strategy of conflating sex and aesthetics was obviously not unique to Poe. His many contemporaries, with whose works Poe was quite familiar, understood the concept of beauty not only in abstract but also in sexual terms. This trend was certainly discernable in earlier periods, but the practice of *openly* sexualizing aesthetics did not

become apparent till the nineteenth century. The work of the Scottish physicist Alexander Walker was one of the most exemplary attempts to reexamine the concept of beauty, as embodied in women, in relation to a number of factors, including aesthetics, sex appeal, and various anatomical considerations. The success of his first work on the subject, *Beauty; Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (1836), was followed by two others, *Intermarriage; or, The Mode in Which, and the Causes Why, Beauty, Health, and Intellect Results from Certain Unions, and Deformity, Decease, and Insanity from Others* (1838) and *Woman Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce* (1839). As the titles of these works suggest, Walker's interests were remarkably wide, but the underlying principle was the same: beauty is a complex concept based on a variety of factors, including sexual desires which it is meant to arouse.

What Walker's contemporaries quickly noticed was his emphasis on the physical aspect of beauty, which could be contrasted with the transcendent ideas held by more traditional writers. His goal, as he stated it in *Woman Physiologically Considered*, was to dispel "worthless and contemptible . . . flatteries addresses to the female sex" and "establish the truth" of what he called "physiological principles" of the relations between the sexes (v). He unequivocally stated that "different kinds and combinations of beauty . . . are founded upon the same principle of organic superiority" (*Beauty* 5). What this idea entailed was, among other things, the importance of such considerations as "the elasticity and freshness of the skin," "the capacity of the pelvis" as well as the "breadth of the haunches" which are necessary for a successful pregnancy (6-7). "Let us then not deceive ourselves respecting the bases of those impressions which one sex experiences from the sight of the other. It is evidently nothing else than the more or less delicate and just perception of a certain conformity of means with a want which has been created by

nature, and which must be satisfied" (8).<sup>113</sup>

Walker was only one of several writers who sought to redefine the concept of beauty in the light of new physiological theories (phrenology was one of them). The period also saw the appearance of a number of works that redefined every concept of human existence, including love and perception of beauty, in strictly biological terms. As they argued, beauty was something not so much *contemplated* but *perceived*. Some scientists even went so far as to drop the term beauty altogether and replace it with the biological concept of physical pleasure.<sup>114</sup>

It is understandable that such a radical scientific stance created so much controversy. There were plenty of people who still adhered to the centuries-old concept of beauty as an asexual and transcendent object of contemplation (which can be traced back to Plotinus and Plato). On the other side were those who saw the concept of beauty in strictly physiological terms. What made the disagreements between them so intense was that their differences were not merely philosophical but also social. At the time when so many beautiful women were victims of sex crimes, the notion of beauty remained a controversial subject. Cheap dailies and crime reportage in antebellum America created the impression that the most beautiful women were those who died violently in the hands of men who fell under their spell.

At Brooklyn, a married lady was seized by a gang of ruffians and violated.

On Coney Island Beach, two sisters, while bathing were attacked by a brawny rascal, and but for the nerve and courage displayed by the

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<sup>113</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Walker's theories, see Robyn Cooper's "Definition and Control: Alexander Walker's Trilogy on Woman" (*Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2.3 [1992]: 341-64).

<sup>114</sup> The case in point is Charles Knowlton's work on birth control *Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People* (1832). Knowlton, to the dismay of many of his contemporaries, explained the concepts of love and attraction strictly as biological functions.

younger of the girls, the brute would have accomplished his purpose. In Philadelphia and Baltimore, similar outrages have been attempted . . . About ten days since, a young lady was violated in the open day light in one of the public parks of the latter city, in the presence of several respectable citizens. (“The Outrage on Mary C. Rogers”)

The names of such young women as Helen Jewett, Louise Missouri, Mary Rogers, Maria Bickford, and Mary Ellen Smith adorned the covers of cheap pamphlets inspired by the gruesome details of their deaths. Few Americans could perceive beauty in asexual terms. What made crime reports even more provocative was that their authors subtly juxtaposed different aesthetic notions of beauty, thus flaming readers’ disagreements. Almost without exception, all victims of such crimes were portrayed as desirable and attractive. What that desirability meant, however, was hard to say—and papers eagerly speculated about this question. For some, women were embodied such concepts as charm, domesticity, and virtue, which had nothing to do with sex. In this sense, the papers reinforced the transcendent character of female beauty. At the same time, some journalists suggested that the women who were murdered were the objects of sex crimes; their attraction was, among other things, of sexual nature. In other words, readers of popular press understood that beauty was somehow entangled in discourse about sex and crime. This was why images of murdered women in the nineteenth century had some unquestionably erotic quality (Fig. 8.4).

Poe was well aware of how controversial the concept of beauty had become. By investing his lyrical poetry and stories with so many sexual overtones, he positioned himself right in the middle of that controversial topic. His notorious dictum that “the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” was in part intended as a provocative commentary on the aesthetic and social tensions



Figure 8.4: The eroticized corpse of Helen Jewett as depicted in contemporary press (1836).

reflected in the coverage of violence against women (“The Philosophy of Composition” 212).

Poe wrote several stories that paid tribute to this gruesome subject, including “Berenice,” “Eleonora,” “Ligeia,” “Morella,” as well as a number of poems such as “Annabel Lee” and “Lenore.” The connections between these works and crime reportage were hard to miss. “Berenice,” for example, adopts an eerie but rather popular subject of tomb-desecration. It tells a story of a deranged man who breaks into the tomb of his beloved and pulls all of the teeth out of her corpse. The themes of some other stories, such as “Morella” and “Ligeia,” are based on the equally popular sensationalist subject of entombment (which Poe also exploited in “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Premature Burial”). Morella dies but mysteriously disappears from her tomb, which

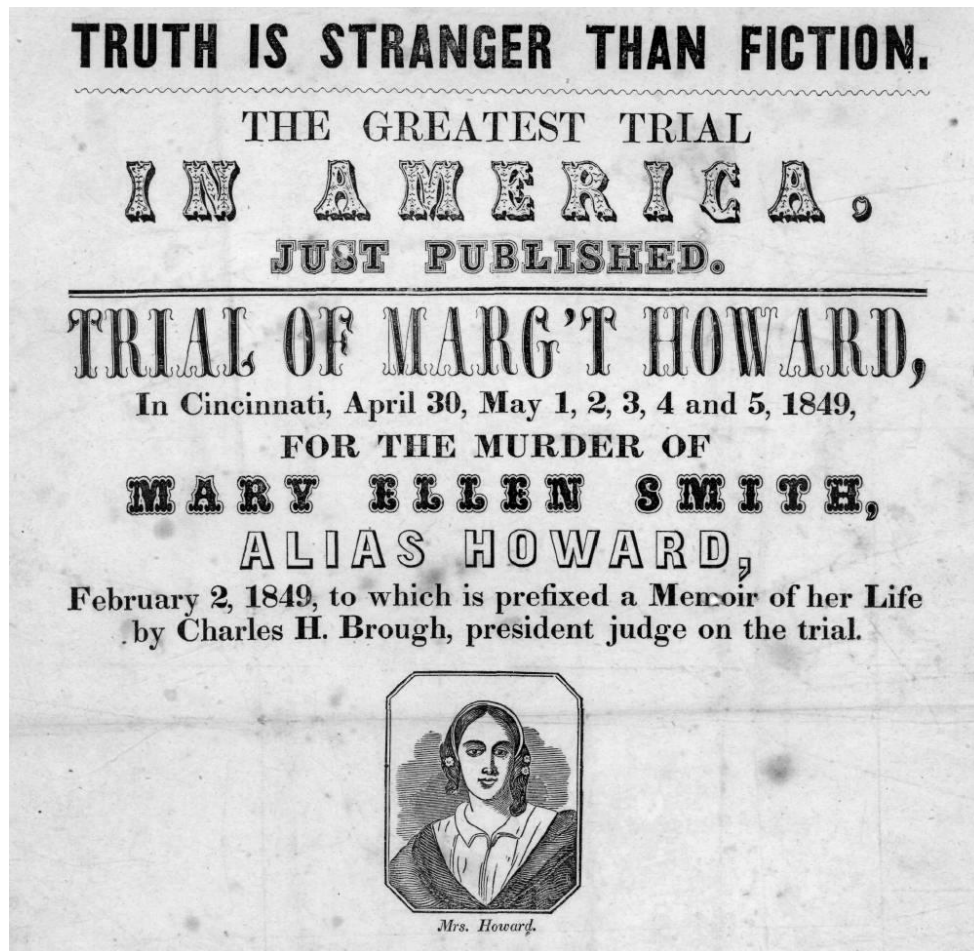


Figure 8.5: An advertisement of a sensationalist pamphlet (1849).

implies that she might have been buried alive. Ligeia, for her part, keeps getting resurrected in some form to the horror of her husband. What contemporary readers appreciated in these stories was not only because of their mesmerizing style but also their focus on extraordinary cases, which readers could easily relate to real-life crimes (Fig. 8.5).

What adds another level of complexity to Poe's stories is that they comment on the antebellum print culture and its sensationalist excess. He exposed some strikingly

negative aspects of sensationalist journalism and its exploitation of violence against women. Contemporary newspapers, as we saw in the earlier chapters, eagerly published stories and reports about women who were violated, dishonored, or killed. It can be said that those murdered women, whose images appeared in coroner reports, testimonies, and newspaper articles, somehow remained both dead and alive, because they were repeatedly resurrected in print. Poe's interest in the subject of resurrection, therefore, can be read not necessarily in terms of his fascination with Gothicism or personal experiences (he witnessed the deaths of several women whom he loved) but as a parody of the incessant exploitation of murder cases in which dead women were incessantly resurrected in print. While reading "Ligeia" and "Berenice," Poe's contemporaries could relate the experience Poe's male protagonists, who witness women's protracted deaths, to their own experience of reading newspaper articles about violent crimes. Poe's reference to Ligeia and her "hideous drama of revivification" (665) aptly described the journalistic preoccupation with such sensational crimes.

The horror which the images of the dying women provoke in narrators of Poe's stories also reminds us of the reading culture of the day. We should not assume that the eerie but captivating appearance of the female characters in such stories as "Ligeia" and "Berenice" reflected Poe's fascination with the Romantic concept of sublime. Poe used this subject as a way to comment, even if indirectly, on the impact of provocative images. The protagonists of his stories, similarly to the consumers of sensationalism, were both terrified and mesmerized by the horrific appearance of the dying women or their apparitions. The reaction of the narrator of "Ligeia," as he recalls his wife's death scene, is a particularly telling example:

The corpse, I repeat, stirred, and now more vigorously than before.

The hues of life flushed up with unwonted energy into the countenance—

the limbs relaxed—and, save that the eyelids were yet pressed heavily together, and that the bandages and draperies of the grave still imparted their charnel character to the figure, I might have dreamed that Rowena had indeed shaken off, utterly, the fetters of Death. But if this idea was not, even then, altogether adopted, I could at least doubt no longer, when, arising from the bed, tottering, with feeble steps, with closed eyes, and with the manner of one bewildered in a dream, the thing that was enshrouded advanced boldly and palpably into the middle of the apartment.

I trembled not—I stirred not—for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor, of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed—had chilled me into stone. I stirred not—but gazed upon the apparition. There was a mad disorder in my thoughts—a tumult unappeasable. (665)

The narrator of “Berenice” has a similar reaction. Like Ligeia, Berenice is perceived as an enigmatic woman who is neither dead nor alive. Her mesmerizing but corpse-like appearance plunge her fiancé in such a state of anxiety that he wishes that he were dead. Her “eyes were lifeless, and lustreless, and seemingly pupilless,” he recalls. “I shrank involuntarily from their glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips. They parted; and in a smile of peculiar meaning, *the teeth* of the changed Berenice disclosed themselves slowly to my view. Would to God that I had never beheld them, or that, having done so, I had died!” (646). The women who stared from the cheap pamphlets investigating their deaths were meant to have the same effect upon their readers. On paper, their eyes were just as lusterless as those of Berenice. Their beauty was eerie. Their gaze, which terrified the male narrators, was unavoidable and

unsettling.

Poe's contemporaries understood his troubled sense of aesthetics reflected the rhetorical tensions in the antebellum sensationalist press and the contentiousness of the concept of beauty. This explains why the style of his works is so odd and incongruous. "There is no exquisite beauty," Poe quotes Francis Bacon, "without some *strangeness* in the proportion" (655). Some passages in his stories are soothing to read.

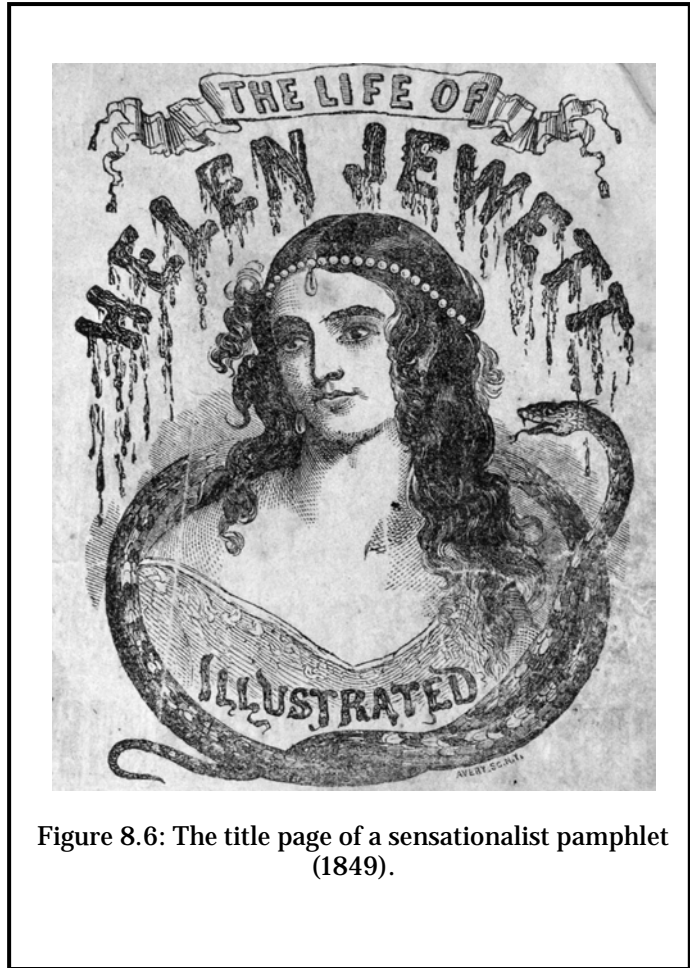


Figure 8.6: The title page of a sensationalist pamphlet (1849).

Others are provocative and terrifying. They mix elements of lyricism, sensationalist literature, and journalism. Poe's stories, in short, are not exercises in literary escapism. They reflect the vibrancy of the increasingly diverse and conflicted literary environment in the 1840s.

What underscores Poe's awareness of the contemporary journalistic conventions is that the style of his prose actually resembles the variegated style of antebellum journalism, which blends various literary elements, sometimes even without any sense of consistency. While reading such works, we can discern traces of Romantic prose, inappropriate lyricism, scandalous details, sexual references, and incongruent components. The following excerpt, taken from a contemporary newspaper article,

highlights the stylistic inconsistencies of such works. It recalls the discovery of Mary Rogers' body, who was brutally murdered in New York in the summer of 1841.

The murder of this girl must have been a horrible affair. It was late in the afternoon of last Thursday, that we were taking a walk along the sea shore, in Hoboken, toward that beautiful promontory where the Sibyl's Cave pours forth its cool waters to lave the parched lip of youth. It was a little before sunset. The last beams of day were struggling through the groves above high cliffs, and shedding a rosy light across the broad Hudson, to New York. We met several group of people coming down. A man stepped up—"Sir, there is a woman found murdered up yonder!" "A woman found murdered!—Where? who?" "I don't know who she is. You will find the poor creature's corpse just beyond the point and the cave. "Let us go—let us," said our companion.

We proceeded in the direction. The walk is beautiful. On the left are the steep marble cliffs, bare in most places, and overhung with deep green trees in the forest. On the right, the waves of the Hudson, rippling up the shore with a gentle murmur. Beyond the promontory, about half way to the Elysian Fields, there is a green bank that the tide embraces up to the edge, at high water. Here, after jumping down from the bank, groups would stop a while, stoop over the remains of Mary Rogers, and pass along. When we saw her, she was laying [sic] on the bank on her back, with a rope around her, and a large stone attached to it, flung in the water. The first look we had of her, was most ghastly. Her forehead and face appeared to have been battered and butchered to a mummy. Here features were scarcely visible, so much violence had been done to her. On

her head she wore a bonnet—light gloves on her hands, with the long watery fingers peering out—her dress was torn in various portions—her shoes were on her feet—and altogether, she presented the most horrible spectacle that eye could see. It almost made our heart sick, and we hurried from the scene, while a rude youth was raising her leg, which hung in the water, and making unfeeling remarks on her dress.

We hastened from the scene. The coroner's jury was held afterwards, and the result is known.

Since that day, the crowds flocking to Hoboken have been immense, and the legends circulated have been innumerable. Only a few days ago, it is stated that a poor young man committed suicide, in the woods above the Elysian Fields. The other day a man fired a pistol on his wife, who barely escaped with a deep laceration. All the unfortunate beings that crowd a large city, seem to go to Hoboken to get rid of their sorrows, or rid of their lives. The beauty of its groves—the picturesqueness of its cliffs and creeks—the deep mystery of its wild woods seem to charm all unfortunates to find their solace there. It was but the other evening, that, while wandering ourself under the frowning cliff, with the big, bright, broad moon, just rising over New York, and tipping with silver her spires and steeples, that a poor youth accosted us—“Gentlemen, will you give money to pay my ferriage? I can find no work, nor have I any thing to eat.”

We have not heard where Mary Rogers has been buried.

(“The Murder of Mary Rogers at Hoboken”)

What we can observe in this excerpt is how awkwardly it mixes different styles,

including Romantic prose and traces of sensationalism. We can recognize some Romantic overtones in descriptions of “the groves above high cliffs,” “the deep mystery of its wild woods,” and “that beautiful promontory where the Sibyl’s Cave pours forth its cool waters to lave the parched lip of youth.” These details are sharply contrasted with crude description of the dead body and references to other crimes that made headlines in the city (“a poor young man [who] committed suicide” and “a man [who] fired a pistol on his wife”). What is also remarkable about the article is that its author felt necessary to underscore his horror and disgust at this crime, something which by then became a journalistic convention. His graphic descriptions of the body are notably guilt-ridden. He claims that the scene made his “heart sick” so that he “hastened from the scene,” while “a rude youth,” whose behavior should be contrasted with that of the narrator, was “making unfeeling remarks on her dress.”

What the article’s stylistic discrepancies suggest is that its author—like many of his contemporaries—found himself at a loss to describe such events. He could not even find the right voice to write about the murder. The main reason for this was that the traditional sensationalist rhetoric, which had been successfully used in similar cases in the past, no longer worked. He had no choice but to allow his writing to absorb various viewpoints, even if it made his prose so awkward. The last section in this chapter takes a close look at the events which are described in this article. It explains in more detail how writers of the antebellum period, including Poe, coped with the rhetorical crisis brought about by the demise of the sensationalist tradition.

## POE, MARY ROGERS, AND THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN SENSATIONALISM

The murder of Mary Rogers in 1841 was one of the most crucial events in history of American sensationalism. Although this event was just one of several similar cases that occurred in the 1830s and 1840s, it was important because of its immense impact on the literary and political culture of the day: it prompted numerous political initiatives, including the creation of the New York Police department and passing some anti-abortion measures; it solidified the negative image of the city; and it inspired an unprecedented level of journalistic coverage. The volume of literary output inspired by that murder, which included Poe's contribution, also made a significant impact on literary conventions. Among other things, it highlighted the negative aspects of journalistic exploitation of such crimes and exposed the contradictions of American sensationalism.

The victim's life—unlike her mysterious death—was somewhat ordinary. Mary Roger was a young, beautiful, and easy-going woman who moved from Connecticut to New York in search of better living and excitement the city offered. She made a living by working in a cigar shop downtown, where she was nicknamed a “pretty cigar girl” (“The Murder of Miss Rogers”). She vanished one summer day while taking a walk through the city, but her disappearance did not cause much alarm. Then a few days later her mutilated body was found floating in the Hudson. The rest was an endless chain of imaginative speculations. Far from going unnoticed, “the bloody and mysterious murder” caused lots of “excitement” (“The Murder of Mary Rogers at Hoboken”). It was almost immediately subjected to frenzied news coverage, as competing papers inundated their curious readers with a deluge of details and speculations about the woman's death. Everybody wanted to know about it. Everybody seemed to have something to say.

The investigation of her death was zealously conducted by the police, journalists, and, by extension, the readers of daily papers who spend days on end speculating about the possible reasons of Mary's death. It was established that on the day of her disappearance she was to spend a night at her aunt's house, where she never arrived. The theory that she was simply kidnapped on a busy New York street was quickly dismissed, leading investigators and readers to suspect that she must have had some plans: a tryst, elopement, or, as some suggested, an appointment with an abortionist. The possibilities seemed endless. The fact that she was an easy-going young woman who was courted by a number of young men added some journalistic worth to the stories about her. There figured, among her plausible companions, a dashing "officer of the U.S. Navy" (whose identity was unknown), "a dark complexioned young man" (with whom she was last seen crossing the river toward New Jersey), a gang of "rowdies" (in whose company she was sighted on the day of her disappearance), her mother's boarder named Daniel C. Payne (who actually turned out to be her fiancé), and John Anderson, the owner of the cigar shop where Mary worked before her disappearance ("The Late Murder of a Young Girl at Hoboken," "The Case of Mary C. Rogers," "The Case of Mary Rogers"). Such a diverse list of suspects encouraged a wide array of theories, including rumors about her sex life. Did she elope? Was she abducted and raped? Was she a victim of a botched abortion? The readers were given a wide choice of options to imagine her last day, and even publish their imaginative theories in press.

Speculations about her death gave way to speculations about her character. Was she a respectable woman, or someone with a tarnished image of a city girl? Was she above the moral corruption of the city or its victim? Preserving the intriguing sense of uncertainty, the papers subtly maneuvered between maintaining that she was a woman of good character and insinuating some sexual impropriety on her part. Overall,

journalists tried to give the impression that her virtue was not to be doubted. It was repeatedly pointed out, for example, that she lived in a “respectable boarding house,” not in one of those trashy brothels that sprang downtown (“The Murder of Miss Rogers”). She was a woman of “an irreproachable character for chastity and veracity” (“The Case of Mary C. Rogers”). At the same time articles about her included numerous hints of her sexual openness, which was supposedly what got her into trouble. She was, after all, a “pretty cigar girl,” a fairly independent young woman who worked in a store that catered to men. She was described as an “amiable and pleasing” woman of “cheerful disposition” who was “not ignorant of the ways of the world” (“The Case of Mary C. Rogers,” “The Mary Rogers Mystery”). Who was the real Mary Rogers?

The readers who regularly browsed the city papers between the summer of 1841 and the spring of 1842 witnessed a remarkable series of transformations of Mary Rogers’ image in press. The descriptions of her character changed from one cliché to another, as if they were borrowed from different sensationalist novels. Depending on the fragile consensus of the day, she was portrayed as a sexually active woman, an innocent girl who was seduced by a rake, or a victim of a botched abortion. The circumstances of her death covered the entire spectrum of sensationalist literature, thus blurring the lines between journalistic and fictional tributes to this case. Journalists such as George Wilkes of the *Police Gazette* and James Gordon Bennett of the New York *Herald* built their careers by exploiting this case. There also circulated plenty of other works of literary and semi-literary nature, such as Poe’s “The Mysterious Death of Marie Roget” (1842), J.H. Ingraham’s *The Beautiful Cigar Girl* (1844), Ned Buntline’s *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1848), and *A Confession of the Awful Bloody Transactions in the Life of Charles Wallace, Fiend-Like Murderer of Miss Mary Rogers* (1851). We can also add to this list a substantial number of scholarly books and articles that continue to appear to

this day, which reminds us that this case has never been put to rest.<sup>115</sup>

The public's fascination with Mary Rogers suggests that she was, in death, a symbolic figure. As Amy Gilman Srebnick argues in her elaborate study of this case, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York*, the person of Mary Rogers was somehow replaced with Mary Rogers as a rhetorical contract, "an extended metaphor of the city" and "a symbol of all that was fractured and fractious in the city's body politic" (63, 62). She became an invention of sensationalist press that

entered into discussions of sexuality and private life and provided through discussions of Mary's history, her imagined death, and even her tortured body, a means to explore the body social and the body politic. From the Rogers story the press created an event, actually several events, and infused them with urban politics and the politics of gender. (63)

The symbolic character of Mary Rogers can be extended even further. As a rhetorical construct which was constantly reinvented in press, she embodied a confluence of various sensationalist traditions that had been developing in America for over two centuries. In that context, her transformation into a body of sensationalist rhetoric was perfectly understandable. Like many of her predecessors, she was merely a stimulus for debates over issues that had very little to do with her personally: abortion, public safety in the growing city, the dangers and merits of being an independent city woman, the youth culture, and so on. What was different in this case, however, is that it

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<sup>115</sup> Book-length scholarly works about Mary Rogers' murder and its consequences included Amy Gilman Srebnick's *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Daniel Stashower's *The Beautiful Cigar Girl: Mary Rogers, Edgar Allan Poe, and the Invention of Murder* (New York: Dutton, 2006), Raymond Paul's *Who Murdered Mary Rogers?* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), and John Walsh's *Poe the Detective: The Curious Circumstances Behind "The Mystery of Marie Roget"* (New Brunswick, NY: Rutgers University Press, 1968).

made the readers particularly aware of the rhetorical excess and moral contradictions of American sensationalism. One could no longer even pretend to ignore the manipulative character of journalists' exploitation of this tragedy and accept their publications, with their pretentiously objective tone, at face value. This is why her murder should be seen not as the point that marked the birth of American sensationalism, as some scholars suggest, but as a sign of its crisis.

The sense of rhetorical crisis, which was precipitated by the demise of that tradition, is apparent in that journalists did not seem to know how to write about these events. The least imaginative of them adopted the traditional tone of seriousness and predictably positioned themselves as diligent public servants whose responsibility was to raise awareness about various important issues. Following the tradition of American jeremiads, they claimed that it was everyone's responsibility to read about what they melodramatically called "[o]ne of the most heartless and atrocious murders that was ever perpetrated in New York" and not to allow it "to sleep the sleep of death" and "be buried in the deep bosom of Hudson" ("The Murder of Mary Rogers at Hoboken"). They claimed to be "the only efficient police, the only efficient judges that we have" in the fight against demoralization of the country and the rising crime, and even went so far as to issue demands that the authorities arrest this or that suspect ("The Outrage on Mary C. Rogers"). Their style at times evoked the tone of Biblical prophets who raged in the dessert against the authorities: "It is in vain to call upon the minister of justice to step in and stay the plague which is at our doors and the community—at least the virtuous portion—must act for themselves" ("The Outrage on Mary C. Rogers"). Some journalists echoed the Puritan hysteria over Satan's progress in America, which gave them an excuse to whine about "the horrible demoralization of society in New York" and "*the lax administration of the laws of a Christian community*" ("The Administration of

Criminal Justice in New York”). They described the city as place which was “disgraced and dishonored in the eyes of the Christian and civilized world” and called for a creation of “one great, one big, one strong, moral movement” that could “reform and reinvigorate the administration of criminal justice” and “protect the lives and property of its inhabitants” (“The Administration of Criminal Justice in New York”). Behind the façade of such moralizing, meanwhile, glared numerous signs of manipulative exploitation of what became an ugly and polarizing outbreak of sensationalism.<sup>116</sup>

Poe made his own contribution to this sensational case with his detective story “The Mystery of Marie Roget.” With it, Poe threw himself right in the midst of the sensationalist frenzy which was sparked by the woman’s death. The story is an odd mixture of fact and fiction—but the same can be said about so many other articles about Mary Rogers. Poe did not write about Mary Rogers of New York, as everyone knew her, but someone named Marie Roget of Paris, a young *grisette* who supposedly died under similar circumstances as her New York double. Further underscoring the fictional aspect of his story, “The Mystery of Marie Roget” was presented as a sequel to a work of fiction, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841). In spite of the fictional details with which Poe ornamented his tale, what every reader at the time could easily notice was that its subject was inspired by real-life events.

In a letter to his publisher, Poe described the project in the following terms:

The story is based upon the assassination of Mary Cecilia Rogers, which created so vast an excitement, some months ago, in New York. I have,

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<sup>116</sup> Particularly exploitative were the anti-abortion moralists. They saw Mary’s death as an opportunity to advance their campaign. Although there was very little evidence that Mary died from a botched abortion, circumstantial evidence seemed convincing enough to create rumors to support that theory. Considering the number of men with whom she socialized before her death, it was reasonable to assume that she got pregnant at some point and sought a way to remedy the situation with an abortion. The fact that Mary’s death coincided with the trial of Ann Lohman (the infamous abortionists who was better known as Madam Restell), both events stimulated considerable anti-abortion hysteria which lasted for years.

however, handled my design in a manner altogether *novel* in literature. I have imagined a series of nearly exact *coincidences* occurring in Paris . . . . Thus, under pretence of showing how Dupin . . . unraveled the mystery of Marie's assassination, I, in reality, enter into a very long and rigorous analysis of the New-York tragedy. No point is omitted. I examine, each by each, the opinions and arguments of the press upon the subject, and show that this subject has been, hitherto, *unapproached*. In fact I believe not only that I have demonstrated the fallacy of the general idea—that the girl was the victim of a gang of ruffians—but have *indicated the assassin* in a manner which will give renewed impetus to investigation. ("Poe to Roberts" 112)

Whether Poe was serious in his claim was hard to say. In fact, the extent to which the story was fictionalized was so unclear that it was almost impossible to figure how to read it.

The story is commonly read as a satire—if not an outright condemnation—of the exploitative coverage of Mary Rogers' death. Its protagonist, a brilliant investigator named Dupin, is quite direct in his disdain for the sensationalist press. The "guilty authors of these communications," as Dupin refers to journalists, were guilty of pointless but lucrative speculations about the murder (198). He insists that "the object of our newspapers rather to create a sensation—to make a point—than to further the cause of truth" (181). Dupin, for his part, is interested in nothing but the truth. It can be concluded that Poe shared the view of his protagonist. Poe's goal in this story, as David S. Reynolds commented, was "repudiating erratic, indulgent reportage of crime in the popular press" (*Beneath the American Renaissance* 247).

Poe also took other steps to distance himself from the sensationalist coverage of

Mary Roger's death. Among other things, he changed the locale of the story and set it in Paris rather than in New York. What is more, he made an effort to shift the story's focus to something other than the murder. He truncated the plot with lengthy philosophical digressions about what he called the "Calculus of Probabilities," a revolutionary investigative method which was developed by Dupin (169). Indeed, the readers of the story are led to believe that its author was interested not so much in the murder that obsessed American journalists, and not even the murder of the fictional character of Marie Roget, but the elaborate method of Dupin's investigative techniques—in short, something other than meaningless speculation of cheap American journalism.

In spite of its persistent anti-sensationalist sentiment, however, the story is not a simple parody of the murder's coverage. It was, all at once, Poe's commentary on the decaying culture of American sensationalism, an attempt to define his place in it, and an expression of his effort to find new ways to write about sensationalist subjects that obsessed the public. "The Mystery of Marie Roget" was, after all, a part of the coverage of the case. Poe's letter explaining the story's design reveals his interest in the case of Mary Rogers. What is surprising about the letter is that Poe's efforts to distance himself from the journalistic frenzy over Mary Rogers' murder are countered with his insistence that his story could have actually contributed something to the actual investigation. Poe's claim that he "*indicated the assassin* in a manner which will give renewed impetus to investigation" sounds very much like the promises of typical newspaper headlines.

It can even be said that Poe's story actually inadvertently endorsed sensationalist journalism. One of the most ironic details the reader comes across is that while Dupin repeatedly condemns journalists for their lack of interests in "truth," his investigation relies *solely* on his ability to analyze the journalistic accounts of this event. He solves the crime by going through numerous papers in search for clues, without actually leaving the

house. Reading trashy papers can, after all, be rewarding. The trick is, Dupin declares like a true newspaper addict, to read as many articles as possible, or better *all* of them, regardless of their caliber. Dupin, therefore, not only endorses the popular notion that one can discover some truth by reading sensationalist papers but also reinforces the illusion created by investigative journalism—investigation is nothing more than an act of careful reading. He explains his method in the following terms: “I will examine the newspapers more generally than you have as yet done. So far, we have only reconnoitred the field of investigation; but it will be strange, indeed, if a comprehensive survey, such as I propose, of the public prints will not afford us some minute points which shall establish a *direction* for inquiry” (191-2). And so Dupin, like thousands of other readers, convinces himself that he can uncover the case by reading the papers which he does not trust.

Such a sharp contrast between Dupin’s effective use of the papers and his antipathy toward them reflects Poe’s duplicitous attitude toward sensationalism. Conflicted as their position seems, their *explicit* condemnation of sensationalist press and their simultaneous endorsement of it is quite common among sensationalist writers of all calibers. All of them use sensationalist materials while at the same time distancing themselves from their rivals. They mercilessly attack and discredit each other while at the same time encouraging their readers to read as much as possible.

The philosophical digressions in Poe’s stories, which many readers assume makes him different from other writers, even further shows his indebtedness to the sensationalist conventions of his day. We should remember that didactic digressions of the kind we find in Poe’s stories were commonly used by many sensationalist writers who wanted to invest their works with a sense of serious purpose. Analytical introductions were almost a stylistic norm. And so were various philosophical

digressions that truncate many sensationalist narratives. With this in mind, we can compare the opening paragraphs in “The Mystery of Marie Roget” to the introduction of another literary tribute to Mary Rogers’ death, *A Confession of the Awful Bloody Transactions in the Life of Charles Wallace, Fiend-Like Murderer of Miss Mary Rogers* (1851). The content of this anonymous pamphlet is well reflected in its title: it is a long criminal adventure that strings together a sequence of almost unrelated but captivating crimes.<sup>117</sup> Before we get to peruse its overly detailed account of Charles Wallace’s murderous spree, which took him from New York through virtually every state, we run into the introduction that asks us to consider a few suggestive questions. How can we benefit from reading about crime? What insight can it offer about human nature? What does it say about the culture?

The author went head-on against the idea that sensationalism and sensationalist spectacles are the signs of bad taste.

There seems to be a propensity in almost every man, woman, and child, to take certain degree of pleasure in the sight or relation of human sin and suffering. Thousands will, in this day, flock to the execution of a criminal, and the history of his life, however uninteresting and dull it may be, is sought and read with great avidity . . . . Some have pronounced this curiosity a depraved appetite, but I am inclined to feel different upon the

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<sup>117</sup> The title of the book is worth quoting in full: *A Confession of the Awful and Bloody Transactions in the life of Charles Wallace, the Fiend-Like Murderer of Miss Mary Rogers, the Beautiful Cigar-Girl of Broadway, New York . . . Together with an Authentic Statement of the Many Burglaries and Murders of Wallace, and the Notorious and Daring Thief, Snelling; and an Account of the Murder and Robbery of Mr. Parks, of Newport, Kentucky, also Perpetrated by Wallace; a Thrilling Narrative of his Intercourse with the Brown Murderess, Emeline Moreere, who, at his Instigation, Assassinated her Master and Mistress, and their Four Helpless Children, with an Axe. For which Atrocious Act They were Burned Alive by a Mob of Infuriated Lynchers on the Banks of the Mississippi, on the 11th day of August 1850. From his own Memoranda, Given at the Burning stake, to the Rev. Henry Tracy* (1851).

subject. It is a *natural* feeling, and therefore *universal*. (v)

Like any of his counterparts, in other words, the pamphlet's author made sure to avoid the accusation of exploiting provocative subjects for voyeuristic reasons and presented his work as, among other things, analysis of sensationalism.

The parallels between this author's bold justification of the pamphlet's sensationalist content and Poe's conflicted use of sensationalist techniques in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" are obvious. Both claimed to be more serious in their intent than they actually were. Both veiled their interest in the sensational with notably disingenuous philosophizing. And finally, both sought to distance themselves from other sensationalist writers by claiming to be exceptionally objective in their search for truth. Dupin's goal "to further the cause of truth" (181) was actually echoed by the author of *A Confession*: "I think it better for them to read the truth than fiction in like cases" (vi). In Dupin's fashion, the editor of *A Confession* lambasted other publications for their lack of journalistic objectivity. And yet after such assurances of their good intentions, both "The Mystery of Marie Roget" and *A Confession* plunge into gory details of sensational crimes, barrage readers with shocking revelations, before reacquiring a disingenuously instructional tone to remind us that we can somehow benefit from these terrible stories. "Should not all who peruse this little work," asks the author of *A Confession*, "reap a benefit from [its] awful end?" (31).

Poe's literary tribute to Mary Rogers' death was meant to highlight the contradictions of the genre. By turning real events that took place in New York into a work of fiction set in Paris, he further exposed the recognizable sensationalist strategy of fictionalizing real-life events. His story was a departure from truth. It was the kind of toying with reality which was common in sensationalist press, and which Dupin laments as he is conducting his investigation by surveying heaps of cheap papers. Dupin's dismay

about journalistic practice of distorting events and planting evidence in hopes of rekindling readers' interest is in a way directed against Poe himself (198). After all, in the content of the actual investigation of Mary Rogers' death in New York, Poe's story could be regarded as planted evidence. Poe's insistence that he "*indicated the assassin* in a manner which will give renewed impetus to investigation" was both promising and misleading, and as such it was little different from the newspaper coverage that manipulated the public's interest and perception of the New York case.<sup>118</sup>

Overall, Poe's contemporaries understood well that his tribute to this affair was not strictly literary, and that his attitude toward the journalistic coverage of the murder was never strictly negative. We should be careful not to take Dupin's attacks on journalists at face value or treat them as an expression of Poe's own sentiment. Even if Poe was critical of the sensationalist coverage of Mary Rogers' death, it was remarkable that he expressed his views in such an indirect manner—by assuming the role of a sensationalist writer and composing a story that heavily relies on sensationalist techniques. In this respect, "The Mystery of Marie Roget" reads like a counterpart of "The Predicament." Both stories simultaneously use and lay bare the techniques which they satirize.

The intentional irony of Poe's reliance on sensationalist techniques also exposes the irony of our appreciation of sensationalist literature. What he wanted us to think about was how we are meant to react to such works. Let us ask the following questions: How would Dupin have read a story like "The Mystery of Marie Roget"? Would it have aided him in his search for truth? Would he have appreciated Poe's theory behind the murder or dismissed it as fanciful exploitation of the tragedy? Would he have treated

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<sup>118</sup> The theory that "Poe wrote the story at the request of John Anderson in an effort to detract attention from himself" certainly suggests that it can be regarded as planted evidence in the actual investigation of Mary Rogers' death (Srebnick 27).

Poe's literary creation as a typical journalistic mutation and rejected it as a speculative account?

Dupin was a complicated reader. His attitude toward sensationalism was as complicated as Poe's own. After all, his investigation and search for the truth benefited from reading various newspapers. It seems that he clearly understood the value of sensationalist press but decidedly refused to admit it. In Dupin, Poe created an ideal but altogether unrealistic reader of the press. He was what any average but misguided consumer of sensationalism hopes to become. And likewise, in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" Poe presented a story which every sensationalist writer could only hope to write—the one that exploits a crime to the fullest while avoiding accusations of being needlessly sensational.

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